Anarchival Dislocations: Modes of Reading (in) Black Studies

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> Someone who pokes about in the past as if rummaging in a storeroom of examples and analogies still has no inkling of how much in a given moment depends on its being made present. (Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'")

> In the archive, we discover not who we are but how "we" are not. (Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*)

Abstract: This essay reviews Stephen Best's *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* in relation to the ongoing reading debates in literary studies and the methodological practices of black studies. Best's work, I argue, expands upon the practice of surface reading he and Sharon Marcus introduced to reveal how an attention to surfaces, which I recharacterize as "topological reading," disrupts misleading seductions of interpretation that remain grounded in allegory. In doing so, Best further reveals the value of surface reading for black studies in particular, which, with its focus on recovery in the archive, is particularly susceptible to "deep" reading practices that aim to construct utopian communitarian notions of black being and belonging. I conclude the review by explicating a brief allusion Best makes to Afro-pessimism in order to detail the political implications of Best's insistence on negativity and the "anti-communitarian undertone" he locates in black studies.

Keywords: surface reading, blackness, melancholy, history, Afro-pessimism

Introduction

Stephen Best begins *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* by claiming, "A communitarian impulse runs deep within black studies. It announces itself in the assumption that in writing about the black past 'we' discover 'our' history."[1] Best takes aim at this assumption that has been fundamental to black studies for the past several decades by proposing an anti-communitarian rereading to challenge black studies' historically burdened insistence on "we." While acknowledging the legitimate hesitancy to apply queer theory's "antisocial thesis" to black studies, Best nonetheless aims to do precisely this (10). Against the various constructions of a communitarian "we," Best locates "an anti-communitarian undertone" within his examples and "extracts from it a sense of both the joy and the pain in genealogical isolation" (11). *None Like Us* sets out "to break the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken" (11). He does this in part by questioning the assumed relation between the present and the past, with the goal of "clear[ing] some space for a black politics that is not animated by a sense of collective condition or solidarity" (64). Best puts pressure, in other words, on the "we" constructed by the work of black studies in relation to the archive and to the legacy of slavery. *None Like Us* thus works against the grain of contemporary black studies, and in doing so, it offers a valuable rethinking of the field, which, Best claims, often resists "self-critique" (1).

In a central move for this critique, Best takes issue with "the recovery imperative" of the "archival turn" in black studies that aims to construct a communitarian "we" by turning to the past, though he is careful not simply to dismiss this work (12-13). Best contends "that, where the doubled imperative persists (in which recovery from the slave past rests on a recovery of it), it is not too

difficult to see the search for lost or absent black culture as substituting for the recovery of a 'we' at the point of our violent origin. That imperative has a way of persisting even in the case of the recent archival turn, where recovery itself has been viewed with the greatest skepticism" (13). Best describes this recovery imperative in many of the major recent interventions—by Vincent Brown, Saidiya Hartman, and Anjali Arondekar, among others—as a form of "melancholy historicism," which "provides for the view that history consists in the *taking possession* of such grievous experience and archival loss" (15). Yet "to frame history in this way preserves faith in the lost object as a counterpoint to the past's irrecoverability. The injury of slavery engenders a loss that requires abundant recompense, which is never (can never *be*) achieved" (16). Melancholy historicism engenders iterations of "negative allegory," marking "an obsession, in essence, with the *failure* of something that was lost to history ever making an appearance" (16-17). A "forensic imagination" emerges from this melancholy historicism and finds itself "directed *toward the recovery of a 'we' at the point of 'our' violent origin*" (21). By drawing our attention to the consequences of these practices, Best asks that we rethink our comportment toward and assumptions about the archive, which often privilege terms of communitarian relationality.

None Like Us aims to show "that there is and can be no 'we' in or following from such a time and place, that what 'we' share is the open secret of 'our' impossibility" (22). In contrast to the two tendencies under critique—1) "the recovery of an impossible community" and 2) "the making of a utopia or dystopia"—Best suggests that the essays collected in *None Like Us* may result in "creating a world that will no longer have me, as would be the point" (26). This desubjectifying impulse echoes Best's title, which comes from the preamble of David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*:

> Having travelled over a considerable portion of these United States, and having, in the course of my travels, taken the most accurate observations of things as they

> exist—the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began, and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more.[2]

Best's focus on "none like us" encapsulates his anti-communitarian project, yet the final phrase of Walker's opening remarks foregrounds the temporal dislocation—or what is also referred to as queer theory's "unhistoricism"—that structures Best's critique of "the recovery imperative" in black studies and future-oriented utopianisms (10). Best's oppositional desire to create a world that would no longer have him names a double gesture of a subject's world-creation and the self-annihilation of the subject of that creation (26). The two halves of *None Like Us* reflect this double gesture, as "the first half addresses a disturbed object and the second extends that thought to a disturbed archive" (87). The book's movement from subject-object relations to the historicity of such relations shows how Best's critique lends itself to a rereading of the black archive.

In what follows, I will focus on two of the many threads developed by Best's work in order to foreground its interventions into both the ongoing reading debates in literary studies and the methodological concerns of black studies. The first thread has to do with Best's explicit development of surface reading in *None Like Us*, which he and Sharon Marcus rather polemically introduced in a well-known special issue of *Representations*. *None Like Us* offers some of the most persuasive extensions and elaborations of surface reading as a method.[3] Yet Best's surface reading can also be further extended and re-described, and in the first section of this article I suggest "topological reading" as one way to understand this shift. Topology, I argue, captures the project of surface reading in a way that avoids some of the pitfalls of "surface," which too often recalls the "depth" it opposes. In the second section, I then elaborate on the implications that follow from the way Best astutely mobilizes surface reading to challenge the insistence on depth and hiddenness in

the archival practices of black studies and its melancholy historicism. Here I foreground the "anarchival" that Best develops as a counter to archival practices. Throughout these sections, I aim to follow the injunction of surface reading "to describe,"[4] but I also include critical interpretations that put pressure on description in an effort to clarify both its values and its limitations. The final section of this article turns to a second, implicit thread of *None Like Us*, which has to do with Best's suggestive allusion to Afro-pessimism and his decision not to engage, beyond this allusion, with that discourse. A discussion of *None Like Us* in this context allows us to understand Best's particular use of the negative in his anti-communitarian project, as well as its political implications. Through this conjunction, I argue that Best's attention to the negative as activity and relation seeks to avoid the slippage that potentially occurs in Afro-pessimist work when the negative becomes an ontological position to occupy and claim, which risks undermining Afro-pessimism's efforts to challenge antiblackness.

Surface, Description, Accuracy

Within the context of black studies and historicism, the readings throughout *None Like Us* put into practice a version of the methodology Best and Marcus proposed in their discussion of "surface reading" that introduced the special issue of *Representations* entitled *The Way We Read Now*. Best and Marcus "take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*."[5] Best's development of this program in *None Like Us* becomes explicit in the first chapter, which reads visual and poetic work by El Anatsui, Mark Bradford, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Beginning with Anatsui, Best admits his "indifference to the question of the

'meaning' of an Anatsui" (32). Instead, Best's interest lies in the way that the viewer's position in relation to the bottle cap art of Anatsui shapes their "reading" of it. As one approaches the art object, what appears to be gold from a distance turns out to be trash. According to Best, this "movement from gold to trash, representation to matter, figuration to literality feels like a call to acknowledge what is simply there…a call to acknowledge the force of the literal that issues from the bottle caps themselves" (32). Assuming, for the moment, that the distinction between figuration and literality can be maintained, we can see that this movement disturbs our allegorical and interpretive impulses, impulses that potentially leave behind the literality—or materiality—on which they depend. As will be more evident in my turn to topology, Best's emphasis on the positional is crucial, as proximity to an artwork "clarifies" the force of the literal that generates its seductive representational implications.

The shift from gold to trash exemplifies the intuitive aspects of surface reading, which aims to shift its focus away from the ideological readings of "deep," symptomatic readers, yet it also gives credence to critiques of its valorization of the self-evident. Charles Sumner, for example, criticizes Best and Marcus for taking "'surface' as a given and self-identical category," that is, for being too "insistently un-dialectical."[6] Sumner argues persuasively that surface reading reduces to a potentially meaningless "fact-finding" program.[7] I intend neither to refute Sumner's critiques nor to become a defender of surface reading as a critical method. I do, however, want to suggest that *None Like Us* puts into practice an attention to surfaces that reveals the potential of this methodology, even if (as will become clearer in what I have to say) Best's methodology exceeds—and, at times, fails to achieve—his own stated aims.

Before returning to *None Like Us*, I want to focus on the example of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" that appears briefly in Best and Marcus's "Surface Reading" because of the way Poe's story exemplifies surface reading and reveals the strategic deception of its program. When I

first read this article, I was struck by the seductive persuasion of this example. Yet at the same time, I was convinced that this example proved misleading.[8] It is worth quoting the passage in its entirety:

> The essays that follow remind us that as much as our objects of study may conceal the structures that give rise to them, they also wear them on their sleeves; that the moments that arrest us in texts need not be considered symptoms, whose true cause exists on another plane of reality, but can themselves indicate important and overlooked truths. As Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" continues to teach us, what lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation—especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it.[9]

Best and Marcus are careful to point out that they are not proposing an all-or-nothing program, as they frequently designate surface reading to be a complement to critical modes of reading. Here the Poe example proves misleading, however, in that it valorizes "attention" to "what lies in plain sight." Yet with the Anatsui example, "what lies in plain sight" is not immediately obvious from any given position. The viewer needs to be close to the artwork in order for it to be "looked *at*." And this attention is of course not the end-goal of Dupin in Poe's story. His attention to "surfaces" allows him to acquire the letter and change the structure of interpersonal relations in the story, as well as exchange the letter for payment from the inept police chief.[10] Similarly, attending merely to "what lies in plain sight" does not seem to be the goal of Best and Marcus, who suggest that "the structures that give rise to" objects of study may appear on their surfaces. In other words, "surface reading" potentially locates structure not "within" an object but on its surface. Surface reading becomes, then, a different way of conceptualizing structure, which, when taken alongside suspicious or deep reading practices, produces a "parallax" view of structure.

None Like Us similarly makes clear that mere attention is not what Best ultimately has in mind with surface reading as his guiding practice. In its attention to positional relations, "surface reading" might be understood instead as a "topological reading." Best's repeated critiques of topography—especially the critical insistence on a "topography of hiddenness" (84)—can be answered, I argue, not with a turn to surfaces in general but with a turn to topology, which foregrounds the importance of position and place on geometric surfaces, which have "length and breadth but no thickness." Topology more strongly avoids the "depth" from which surface reading aims to distance itself in part because nothing on a topological surface can be "hidden" in the same way. While Best's critique of the figurative reading of the Anatsui in terms of "gold" seemingly reproduces the disenchanting movement of symptomatic reading, his insistence on positionality stresses the provisional nature of the subject's point of view, one that cannot be converted into the god's eye position encouraged by topographical models favored by "deep" reading. Rather than merely attend to surfaces as "given and self-identical," to borrow Sumner's critical phrase, Best and Marcus primarily take issue with symptomatic reading's assumption that the "true" meaning of a text "exists on another plane of reality."[11]

We can see Best's reading of a single plane or dimension following his discussion of El Anatsui in chapter one when he turns to the dense canvases of Mark Bradford. Best acknowledges in his discussion of Bradford that "a metaphor" is "struggling to assert itself here, one central to recent critical theory, which it will be my intention to suppress" (53). This is, it turns out, the metaphor of the "palimpsest." Best's self-conscious "suppression" of this metaphor reveals how seductive such depth metaphors have become in our critical practice.[12] "Surface reading," in this sense, is far from a "natural" practice that takes surfaces as "given"; in contrast, surface reading only emerges through an act of will. Rather than as palimpsests, and according to a "topography of hiddenness," Best proposes we see the surfaces of Bradford's art "as structured according to a logic

of immurement (*immure*: L. *murare* 'to wall'; to shut up or enclose within walls; to imprison; to confine as in a prison or fortress)" (54). Best then continues, "*what if we saw the surfaces themselves as part of a process of building a history, of archiving fragments from our everyday world and then walling them up, sealing them off, imprisoning them, and entombing them within layers of paper*" (54)? To avoid reproducing the binaries produced by models of "deep" reading, this immurement must be understood in a topological way. That is, surfaces or points on these surfaces are "entombed" not within a three-dimensional space but "within" or along a surface. Topological readings insist on one plane of reality with different viewpoints, rather than comb the hidden depths for another, truer reality.

Best implicitly makes the case for topological description in his reading of Bradford's *A Truly Rich Man Is One Whose Children Run Into His Arms Even When His Hands Are Empty*, which seems to give the viewer "a map or a bird's-eye view of a city" (54). The layers of this painting's materials do not allow for the recovery of writing or semantic content—as in a palimpsest. Instead, "what was originally 'print' finds itself transformed into 'paint,'" and the work produces "new relations" (54). The work of art becomes a kind of Möbius strip to be followed, rather than a tomb to be unearthed or an archaeological site to uncover. This descriptive movement from print to paint again stresses the movement from the figural to the literal that Best mobilizes to disrupt allegorical readings. Best's injunction "to think like artworks" in this chapter can here be interpreted to mean a thinking that "is 'not *about* art' at all, but '*inside* art'" (37, 62). Drawing on Eve Kosofky Sedgwick's emphasis on "beside," a position that, she argues, avoids the pitfalls of paranoid critiques, Best seeks not only to change our perceptual comportment toward artworks but also to change our position in relation to artworks (62). To think like a work of art is to be beside a work of art, in a relation of neither superiority nor inferiority that foregoes the desire to interpret. Yet as Ellen Rooney argues, "description can never be literal and thereby undistorted."[13] One obvious support for this claim appears in the central simile of Best's chapter—to think *like* a work of art—that reveals his

dependence on the figural. More seriously, in all of the uses of literality I have cited where Best turns to the literal against the figural, representational, and allegorical, the literal itself becomes a figure for "accurate description." That is, Best cannot prevent the process by which non-allegorical, literal descriptions produce new allegories in which the literal becomes a figure that disavows its own figural status. To think like an artwork and to describe the surface of art require one implicitly to figure the literal while disavowing the figural grounds of what should be a base literality or materiality, as if the literal is distinct from and merely generative of the figural.

As this discussion of topological surfaces and the literal suggests, *None Like Us* also grapples with surface reading's no less controversial insistence on "accuracy," which is intimately connected to its privilege of the literal surface. After their allusion to Poe, Best and Marcus continue:

> Of course, one of the great questions of the last two centuries has been whether we can ever set aside our responses in order to *produce undistorted accounts of things*, since our responses are often unconscious and unknowable. Without fully answering that question, we believe that even if we cannot exhaustively explain what causes our responses, *we can strive to describe them accurately*, and that there is nothing inherently truthful or misleading about them.[14]

Best and Marcus then close their essay with two related claims: "that *to see more clearly* does not require that we plumb hidden depths and that *producing accurate accounts of surfaces* is not antithetical to critique."[15] This insistence on accuracy extends the "self-identity" of surfaces Sumner locates in Best and Marcus's designation. Questions of "accuracy" appear most prominently in chapters three and four of *None Like Us*, which again offers a more nuanced practice of what Best and Marcus propose in their introduction to surface reading. In chapter four, for example, Best focuses on rumors in the archive, as he traces a series of rumors in early 19th-century Barbados stemming from erroneous reports about British parliamentary debates. Best argues that "the rhetorical effects" of rumor rather

than its "status as reality or fiction" matter (130). The central error "was the assumption, on the part of the slaves, that Britain possessed a monarch to whom they could appeal in the first place, the assumption that the field of imperial sovereignty possessed a standpoint from which they could speak" (112). Rumor produces "a reality without ontology, present only as an effect of its deferral and denial" (117). From this discussion, Best shifts to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to describe the ways in which Jacobs produces an "agency of the letter" (120). As Jacobs (via her pseudonym, Linda Brent) writes false letters to her slaveowner in an effort to conceal her location, she presents herself as "an intentional subject who speaks from the non-place of representation" (120). Reading her letters as an open secret, Best describes their emptiness—or "hollowed-out ontology"—as "pivotal to liberation and meaning" (120). This "agency of the letter" signals a "language without a subject, language that comes from no place" (120). By striving to describe rumors accurately, Best reconstructs an anti-communitarian undertone generated by a topological agency of the letter that counters the agency ascribed to subjects.

To describe Jacobs's use of rumor, Best draws on Gérard Genette's notion of metalepsis as a rupture between diegetic and extra-diegetic levels that intrudes upon the narrative boundaries (89). Best reads Jacobs's proliferating uses of rumor as instances of metalepsis—it is often unclear, for instance, whether she invents or merely records the rumors she tells in *Incidents*—which describes the "non-place" of the subject of rumor, who is either the enunciating subject of rumor or the subject produced by rumor. Metalepsis negates—or empties—the ontology of the subject of rumor by destabilizing the subject's position. The subject of rumor *is* nowhere. In his reading of Gwendolyn Brooks's "Boy Breaking Glass" that concludes chapter one, for example, Best similarly argues that the poem transforms "reading into an ascetic practice of self-emptying" (61). Like the artworks and like rumor, the poem produces an allegorical or figurative reading only to disrupt it. Best's sense of "accurate description," then, seems to focus on the description of these rhetorical disruptions—

disruptions that both generate and undermine representational or interpretive content—rather than on interpretations of their meanings.

Anarchival Mourning against Archival Melancholy

One of the great innovations of *None Like Us* is its engagement with both the reading debates in literary studies in general and the methodological assumptions of black studies in particular. Throughout *None Like Us*, Best depends on critics and authors as metonyms for larger trends, and in his second chapter, he foregrounds the place of Toni Morrison, who remains central to black studies, as well as to literary studies more broadly. Best's reading hinges on Morrison's shift from *Beloved* to *A Mercy* and offers one of the clearest iterations of the project of *None Like Us* and its critique of melancholic historicism. According to Best, if *Beloved* can be read as the paradigm for a melancholic turn to the slave past to understand the black present, then *A Mercy* can be read as *Beloved*'s disarticulation, its undoing. In this chapter, Best admits that his "goal of replacing holding with letting go, clutching with disavowal" positions him "against the grain of work advanced under the banners of 'recovery' and 'melancholy'" (65). Nevertheless, Best argues that the melancholy of *Beloved* shifts to the mourning of *A Mercy*: "Returning [in *A Mercy*] to meditate on race and slavery, by refusing to make the slave past the progenitor of the existential condition of black people, or of black people alone, Morrison throws into question the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism for understanding and apprehending the black political present" (78-79). *A Mercy*, in this reading, throws into question the recovery paradigm of melancholic historicism, which *Beloved* itself has come to exemplify. To make this reading, however, Best must not only schematize mourning and melancholy but also treat Morrison's oeuvre as an allegory of modes of reading. In other words,

the ostensibly non-allegorical thinking like a work of art of chapter one shifts in chapter two to an allegorical reconversion of the literal into the figurative that enables Best's turn to mourning.

The shift from melancholy to mourning works across Best's intervention into black studies, but it is worth nuancing this shift by returning to Freud. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud sets out to compare melancholia to the "normal affect of mourning" in order to define the former.[16] Freud is careful to indicate, however, that it is only our ability to explain mourning that prevents it from seeming pathological.[17] In fact, the two affects seem strikingly similar. Both respond to loss with "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity."[18] Melancholia's key difference is that it involves "a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment."[19] Melancholia, in other words, involves an ego-loss absent in mourning. In melancholia, the lost object comes to disturb the subject in pathological and destructive ways. From this brief description, it should be clear both *how* Best draws on this distinction—melancholic historicism in fact blocks the construction of a "we" in the black political present—and *why* he avoids a more sustained engagement with Freud—he seems uninterested in the pathological implications of Freudian psychology. The "letting go" in *A Mercy* allows rather than prevents the possibility of sustaining an ego and therefore a "healthy" subjectivity.[20] This in turn avoids the double bind produced by *Beloved*'s instantiation of the recovery imperative.

Surface reading is not inherently or necessarily amenable to an anti-communitarian project, but because it aims to be inherently resistant to the "deep" reading that characterizes melancholic reading in the archive, as exemplified by *Beloved*, surface readings "let go" of the critical drive constitutive of other reading practices in favor of description, even as they aim to complement, rather than undermine, these practices. *None Like Us* similarly attempts to "let go" through an

autoimmune process: in order to let go of the past, Best constantly returns to it and rereads it. This is the "disavowal" Best locates in *A Mercy*, a kind of intermediary state between melancholy and mourning in the strictest sense. Best's reading of *A Mercy* and his engagements with the archive in the second part of *None Like Us* can be understood in terms of his neologism, the "anarchival":

> The instability and apocalypticism of El Anatsui, Mark Bradford, and Gwendolyn Brooks returns, in this respect, modeling the self-dissolution of the subject. The problem of the archive is less a question of the ontology of the object of the past than the ontological *disturbance* the archive produces, less a concern with having or losing one's object (with the presence or absence of the thing slavery and supremacist culture are alleged to have caused me to lose) than a recognition that the objects of black culture are, to coin a term, 'anarchival.'" (87-88)

Best's attention to the "anarchival" can be seen as his entrance into the impossibility of a "we" in black studies from the position of temporality. Like other scholars of black studies, notably Christina Sharpe and Michelle Wright, Best aims to interrupt linear models of time that constitute a communitarian "we." The "anarchival" resonates with Sharpe's notion of "anagrammatical blackness," where "*Ana-*, as a prefix, means 'up, in place or time, back, again, anew.' So, blackness anew, blackness as a/temporal, in and out of place and time and putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made."[21] The "an" of anarchival also signals that Best aims to resist the exclusionary and problematic assumption of "continuity" in approaches to the archive. According to Wright, "discourses on Middle Passage Blackness that account for its formation through this spacetime" of the linear progress narrative "are stuck in this baffling state of affairs: how can one retain the historical continuity…of Middle Passage Blackness *and* accurately represent all its many manifestations?"[22] The anarchival resists the melancholic possession characteristic of archival work that aims to "recover" from the past a sense of self and community for the present.

To address the archive's "ontological disturbance," Best proposes "a shift from a historical to a rhetorical mode, from a mode of writing that keeps reintroducing a sense of loss in the hope of retrieval to one predicated on 'knowing what withholds itself from the possibility of being known,' much like the tropes of metalepsis, paralepsis, irony, and litotes, which involve a negation or an awareness of not saying something" (88). Best therefore cleverly maintains the value of the archive but seeks to change our relation to it. We may still—to borrow Walter Benjamin's analogy from my epigraph—appear to be "rummaging in a storeroom of examples and analogies," but we do so not to "retrieve" answers.[23] Against "the notion *that what is hidden is more authentic than what is visible for all to see*" and against the recovery imperative that creates what it seeks to find, Best proposes—following the project of surface reading—"the more modest task of simply *describing* something that appears to be vanishing" (86, 87).

The discussion of an archival anecdote about a suicide bombing in chapter three models this difference between the historical and rhetorical or anarchival, as well as the value of describing over—or, at least, before—interpreting. Best begins this chapter by describing an anecdotal account of an African chief who allegedly "'blew up himself and all his Enemies at once…putting an end to our Siege and his life.'"[24] This comes from an account by Willem Bosman, who worked for the Dutch West India Company on the Gold Coast, and it has generated, as Best elaborates, a multitude of interpretations and interpretive questions. Specifically, the interpretations of the suicide bombing foreground two poles: the suicide represents either a creative and generative act of resistance or a non-creative and unprecedented act that merely expresses the logic of a violently oppressive system (93-94). Best aims, however, to shift away from these approaches and "postpone interpretation," again privileging literal description over allegorical reading (95).

Before concluding this chapter, Best includes a discussion of a slave song recorded in the journals of Matthew "Monk" Lewis that is important for its development of Best's reading of

metalepsis and for the way it operates as a kind of counterpoint to the final return to the suicide bombing. The refrain of the slave song from Jamaica that Best cites refers to the practices of a slave owner "whose habit it was to send sick and dying slaves to a remote part of the property, called the Gulley," to be left to their fate (104).[25] This song registers, in other words, the scene of social death created by the slave system. Best then recounts a scene in which the master saw his former slave, whom he supposed to have died in the Gulley, in Kingston (104). The master tried but failed to recapture the slave due to the sympathy created amongst the city crowd when his former slave "'cried out most piteously.'"[26] Because the journal account of this scene shifts to third person, Best notes that it is unlikely the slave said what he is said to have said. Nevertheless, Best reads this sequence of events as revealing the way in which "social death opened up the very parentheses into which the slave escaped" (105). For Best, this signals "*the metalepsis of the subject*, where the slave makes himself once over from the stuff out of which he had been made (the figure of a figure). But metalepsis is, after all, the trope of disappearance, the trope of obscured cause" (105). The song in this reading gestures to "those moments in which the social cannot contain a sense of agency, or when agency is expressed as a refusal of the possibilities of social action that have been shaped and organized by colonial power" (105). One possibility opened up by this reading is that listeners of the song might "carry" the slave "as the trace of the disappearance [they] hope someday [themselves] to achieve" (105). The metalepsis of the subject here therefore stages an anarchival dislocation that registers the disappearance or impossibility of a subject, either singular or collective.

Best then begins to conclude chapter three with "one final confession": the suicide bomber was not, in fact, the African chief but the commander of the Dutch fort and employee of the Dutch West India Company, Jan de Liefde (105-6). According to Best, "history was set off on the wrong track by an error of translation," as the mistranslation of the Dutch "van" led to the mistaken

reading of the cause of the bombing (106). This error reveals the value of descriptive work that undermines the various misled interpretations offered of the suicide bombing:

> The Dutchman who blew himself up must drop out of history for everyday proof of the African martyr spirit to emerge. But the bombing in Guinea wasn't a proof to buttress anyone's thesis of a culture or belief, resistance or nihilism. The martyrdom wasn't even a martyrdom, for the African who destroyed himself in the annals of colonial history was only a figure of a figure. (106)

As "a figure of a figure," the African becomes subject to a metalepsis that inverts the previous example and disturbs the archive's intelligibility. Where the slave in Jamaica escapes through metalepsis, a figure of disappearance and obscured causes, the African in Guinea vanishes as a martyr. These examples therefore complicate narratives of heroic resistance or pessimistic nihilism often attributed to the archive.

Best's investment in metalepsis can be read productively alongside Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s focus on chiasmus to foreground different ways of conceptualizing subjectivity in black studies. According to Gates, chiasmus is "perhaps the most commonly used rhetorical figure in the slave narratives and throughout subsequent black literature."[27] In his discussion of Frederick Douglass and Zora Neale Hurston, Gates emphasizes the role of chiasmus and links its dialectical movement specifically to agency.[28] According to Gates, Douglass's famous chiasmus—"You have seen how a man became a slave, you will see how a slave became a man"—establishes chiasmus as "the central trope of slave narration, in which a slave-object writes himself or herself into a human-subject through the act of writing."[29] Best, however, has shown us another trope for understanding blackness and being, one that does not insist on agency. Saidiya Hartman's work has provided one of the most profound recent critiques of agency based on its imbrication with restrictive liberal politics, and her work helps us see how the anti-communitarian undertone furthers this critical

project. In a discussion with Frank Wilderson about slave narratives, Hartman argues, "every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration, regardless of whether it was a leftist narrative of political agency—the slave stepping into someone else's shoes and then becoming a political agent—or whether it was about being able to unveil the slave's humanity by actually finding oneself in that position."[30] In other words, narratives promising agency—even those chiasmic narratives described by Gates—too often undermine or compromise the agency supposedly attributed to their subjects. Rather than the willful subject—that is an agental subject with depth—Best's focus on the metalepsis of the subject follows "the agency of the letter," which aims to circumvent the "obliteration" described by Hartman (89).

This discussion has likely been disorienting to some extent, and Best only offers an implicit rationale for the disorientation constitutive of his complex use of metalepsis. This effect stems, I argue, from a double metalepsis. As he discusses in the methodological interstice that divides the two halves of *None Like Us*, he moves from a rhetorical definition of metalepsis, which names a "perversion" of temporal sequences by attributing a present effect "to a remote cause," to Genette's narratological definition of metalepsis discussed earlier (88, 89).[31] Both appear in chapter three, as the section that addresses the slave song and escaped Jamaican slave—"Metalepsis in History"—signals with its title a metaleptic shift in registers at the level of history and the archive (103). Within this section, though, the "metalepsis of the subject" signals a metaleptic shift at the level of rhetoric and grammar (105). This doubling intensifies the impossibility of constructing a unified and agental "we" from the archive. As this essay's second epigraph (and final line of *None Like Us*) articulates, "In the archive, we discover not who we are but how 'we' are not" (132). There can be no "we" because metalepsis confounds the chiasmic production of an agental subject.

Melancholia, Negativity, and the Being or ~~Being~~ of Blackness

Agency and community remain particularly vexed questions in black studies, and to continue this discussion, I aim in this third section to explicate the particular type of negativity that appears in Best's anti-communitarian impulse by reading it with and against the negativity that appears in Afro-pessimism.[32] In the main body of *None Like Us*, Best mentions Afro-pessimism just once, and it appears in conjunction with Jared Sexton's name, which also appears just once in the main body (supplemented by two endnotes) (22). Best does, however, engage with Orlando Patterson, who has come to be associated with Afro-pessimist work, throughout *None Like Us* (37-38, 67-68, 99-102, 164n. 23). Patterson offers a precedent for Best's argument against the communal "we" in "Toward a Future That Has No Past," where he argues, "there is no a priori necessity that, because a people has experienced slavery, they will all share a legacy of slavery," and questions "whether there is any continuity between the patterns of life in today's ghetto and on Southern plantations of the last century—in spite of an almost universal assumption that there is such a link."[33] Best emphasizes Patterson's critique of historical continuity and recommendation that blacks of America "abandon their search for a past" without focusing on Patterson's "pessimism."[34] Yet a reading of Best alongside some of the recent work associated with Afro-pessimism, especially by Calvin L. Warren, reveals both the proximity and distance between the negativity of Best's anti-communal investments and the negativity of Afro-pessimism. This in turn clarifies the role of negation in two approaches to blackness and being, as well as the political implications of these approaches.

Best's project is indeed quite close to that of Afro-pessimism, which he acknowledges in an endnote that registers the proximity of his notion of being "unfit for history" (the title of the introduction as well as the title of a subsection in chapter three) to Sexton's notion of "the social life of social death" (138n.20). According to Best, however, the main difference lies in his desire "to remove the question of antiblackness" from the registers of ontology and power "to the registers of

rhetoric and relation" (137n.18). For Best, rhetorical readings mediate ontological and historical discussions. Although Best does not say explicitly why he desires to make this move, his overarching interest in the "we" of blackness suggests that ontological positions emerge through rhetorical constructions, rather than the reverse. Rather than to Sexton, a turn to Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*—also published in 2018 through Duke University Press and also invested in the black archive—offers the most useful counterpoint to *None Like Us* and its emphasis on rhetoric. Like Best, Warren aims to reread black studies, but for Warren, ontology rather than rhetoric appears as the central concern. According to Warren, politics and political rhetoric name merely ontology's symptoms, and politics' symptomatic inefficacy appears through the failure of "progressive legislation" and "political movements" "to transform black ~~being~~ into human being, from fleshless bodies to recognized ontologies."[35] Warren recognizes that "political discourse" may articulate a threatening "metaphysical anxiety," but this discourse cannot fundamentally change the ontological structures constitutive of it.[36] Best's insistence on rhetoric posits an inversion: ontological positions result from, are produced by, rhetorical movements. The literality and figuration of rhetoric generate ontology. What do we make of this chiasmus that appears within black studies, a chiasmus in which the movement from ontology to rhetoric (Warren) confronts the movement from rhetoric to ontology (Best)?

To begin to answer this question of a chiasmus in black studies, I turn now to Warren's opening example in *Ontological Terror* of Black Lives Matter, which functions as a synecdoche for his project as a whole. Yet Warren's discussion of Black Lives Matter also reveals some of the limits both to his insistence on an ontological revolution and to his understanding of political rhetoric and action as merely symptomatic. Warren claims that "Black Lives Matter" "performs philosophical labor" in that it asks, "can blacks have life? What would such life *mean* within an antiblack world?"[37] Black Lives Matter, the declaration or call, certainly insists on a philosophical position, in which

black life ceases to be the space onto which ontology projects its constitutive nothingness. Yet Warren suggests that the insistence of this call does nothing to mitigate its inefficacy—police brutality and murders continue. So Black Lives Matter grounds two of Warren's claims: 1) it is at the level of ontology that we must resist and 2) political articulations cannot change this ontological register. I would argue, however, that no ontological revolution can take place except through political articulations. Warren's example of Black Lives Matter reveals an indistinction that goes unacknowledged in his text. The call or declaration, "Black Lives Matter," intervenes at the ontological level—as described by Warren—but it also makes a demand to the orders of domination, that is, it strives to enact an emancipatory politics against and from within the social order. Despite potential claims of identity politics, this call can be read as an insistence on the inequality of what Jacques Rancière designates the police, that is, "the set of procedures whereby aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution."[38] Rancière thus distinguishes between mainstream politics and political functions, which he re-describes as the police, and democratic politics, which he reserves for acts of disagreement or dissensus that interrupt the workings of the police. Because Black Lives Matter calls for equality, it potentially functions as an instance of dissensual equality against consensus orders of inequality.[39] While Warren is certainly right to note the persistence of antiblackness, he is wrong to dismiss politics as such. As Rancière argues throughout his writing, no political work will ever abolish, once and for all, the inequality of the police. Instead, politics aims to disrupt and reorder the consensus of the police. For democratic politics operates as a drive for equality rather than as a utopian realization of equality; in fact, Rancière's insight involves the recognition that equality can only occur through interruption. The orders of domination will always re-form. By dismissing politics entirely, Warren dismisses this work

of interruption, which cannot be reduced to "the myth of progress, temporal change, and freedom dreams" he criticizes in liberal and humanist narratives.[40]

Warren's use of Black Lives Matter as a frame for *Ontological Terror* works primarily because he abstracts the call or slogan from the scene of its enunciation. In many of the Black Lives Matter protests, the concern is precisely with the political act of appearance, of putting "the part that has no part" in disagreement with the part that "counts."[41] This act always exceeds a politics of recognition, representation, or other strategies that constitute liberalism and the police order. Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that "the maintenance of white supremacy relies on the continued existence and exploitation of spaces of nonappearance."[42] This complements Rancière's claim that "policing is not so much the 'disciplining' of bodies as a rule of governing their appearing."[43] Politics interrupts this configuration of the police by reconfiguring what can appear; that which should not appear, according to the order of domination, suddenly enters the scene. Given that politics for Rancière is defined as "a polemic about the human," one which begins "with the capacity of uncounted humans to get themselves counted by themselves declaring their membership and their capacity," Black Lives Matter can be read as an attempt to challenge through a political act the antiblackness of ontology and of the symbolic order.[44] While the antiblackness of our order persists, it remains the case that politics allows collective subjects to challenge the policing of ontology.

Yet Warren's insistence on ontology over political action and rhetoric leads him to conclude "that there are no solutions to the problem of antiblackness—there is only endurance."[45] Both Warren and Best gesture to a world-destroying shift—Warren's antihumanist critique of ontology and Best's rhetorical critique of the communal "we" in black studies—but Warren's insistence that our thinking must go to "the 'valley of the shadow of death'" in order "to imagine an existence anew" risks substantializing the negative in a way that is self-defeating.[46] That is, blackness operates both as a figure for negativity and *is* nothing but negativity. For example, in his critique of progress

narratives, which hold "that things are getting better,"[47] Warren offers what Michelle Wright would characterize as "a reverse linear narrative indicating that no *Black* progress has been made because of the continual oppression by white Western hegemonies that began with slavery, moved through colonialism, and now deploy an array of cultural, political, economic, and military power through social and governmental technologies to keep Blacks not only as subalterns…but also as the (white) Western Other."[48] Warren's ontological argument depends on an all-or-nothing logic, black being or black ~~being~~.

As he makes this argument, Warren slips between the "as if" of rhetoric and the "as such" of ontology. In his presentation of this indistinction that constructs blackness as negativity, for example, Warren risks reifying the very permanence of antiblackness that his project critiques and that which he must endure. This is analogous to the historicist who creates what they aim to find in the archive. I maintain that Warren "risks" this danger of reification because Warren's insistence on the "function" of blackness attempts, with its Lacanian and mathematical resonances, to circumvent the rhetorical dimension and instead articulate the ontological foundations of his argument.[49] Yet in his own use of mathematical formalization, Lacan admits that "no formalization of language is transmissible without the use of language itself."[50] Similarly, Warren encounters this problem when he claims that "black ~~being~~ incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)."[51] For Warren, "The black body is but an ontic illusion" that "provides form for a nothing that metaphysics works tirelessly to obliterate."[52] Warren then offers a persuasive analogy—emphasizing the value of the rhetorical—to Lacan's example of the vase, in which we can "understand the black body as the vase that provides form for the formlessness of *nothingness*. The black body holds this nothing, a nothing that is projected onto it."[53] Warren certainly knows that for Lacan the vase reveals the way in which "emptiness and fullness"

are co-constitutive: "the fashioning of the signifier [of the vase] and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical."[54] Matter and nothing, the symbolic and the real, cannot be isolated or, to use a Lacanian expression, unknotted.[55] Yet this is precisely what Warren frequently does when he shifts away from the "material" of the black body, the "matter" of blackness, to the nothingness of black ~~being~~. In other words, blackness at times shifts in Warren's argument from "holding" nothingness to "being" nothing. Warren offers a powerful argument on the function of blackness for ontology, but his discussion requires rhetoric, understood in the broadest sense, to be merely ornamental, secondary, or derivative. Yet because formlessness as such cannot be approached, Warren can only do so through its incarnation. Warren excludes the possibility that rhetoric may engender that which it supposedly incarnates, and it is in this act of exclusion, which often appears as an implicit or unconscious disavowal, that he reifies what he aims to critique.

In contrast, Best aims to avoid substantializing claims about blackness in his insistence on the rhetoric—rather than ontology—of blackness, and he also avoids the extremes of the linear progress narrative and its reversal in his notion of the "anarchival." Like Christina Sharpe, who describes blackness as an "excess" that generates "crisis,"[56] Best's description of the anti-communitarian undertone of black studies reveals the workings of a death drive that moves incessantly along a signifying chain, a death drive that does not, like Warren's image of negativity, aim for death as such. Warren's final chapter emphasizes this when he describes the antiblack world's "catachrestic fantasy," which "emerges from the *need to give form to that which is nothing*."[57] Warren's subversive response, it seems, is to claim—to take possession of—this "nothing." Where Best's figures of negation, such as metalepsis, allow him "to linger in the break," to borrow Fred Moten's phrasing, Warren's interest in catachresis—from the point of view of antiblackness and blackness—becomes an occupation of the break itself.[58] Where Warren calls for an ontological

revolution to destroy the antiblack world and its catachrestic fantasy, Best calls for a permanent revolution generated by the agency of the letter.

I am necessarily schematizing Warren's more nuanced argument here, and to be fair to Afro-pessimist discourse more broadly, I should make clear that Sexton insists that this reification of negativity is precisely what Afro-pessimism does not do when he asserts that the Afro-pessimist polemic declares that "black life is not social, or rather black life is *lived* in social *death*, which is also *social* death."[59] According to Sexton, "black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system."[60] Put simply, "Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but underground, in outer space."[61] Sexton suggests this is agreed upon by both Afro-pessimists and black optimists.[62] Best, however, takes issue with this claim as "an object of universal assent," even as he acknowledges its influence on debates in the field (138n.20). Best's motivation here has to do with the way in which Sexton's "claim feels almost too stark, too absolute" (138n.20). That is, in spite of Sexton's insistent opposition to an absolute claim about negativity, he offers, according to Best, another, dangerously absolute claim for the universality of an object of consensus. Fred Moten's engagement with Afro-pessimism substantiates Best's rebuttal, as Moten claims that "the political field" relegates blackness to social death, but the political itself does not produce this living death.[63] Against the tendency to figure nothingness as absolute, Moten prefers to name the "relative nothingness of black life," which insists on the relationality between blackness and antiblackness. "Nothing" only appears in and through this relation. Best's metalepsis of the subject, I argue, insists as well on this relative nothingness, while Warren's catachresis, and his focus on ontology, at times slips into a conception of nothing as absolute, as outside or beyond relation, which converts nothing into nothing-as-something. We have, then, another parallax, but in

this case it is a parallax view of blackness, as Best and Warren offer us two approaches to blackness: one stands "beside" dispossession and nothingness while another claims the dispossession and nothingness that blackness is made to figure.[64] Both construct new modes of understanding black being, but in the latter, ~~being~~ always appears under erasure, potentially reifying the negative center around which the torsion of black being revolves.

Though Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia shadows much of *None Like Us*, I would argue that his discussion of an "oceanic feeling" in *Civilization and Its Discontents* is the unacknowledged specter of Best's critique of communitarian thinking, as well as his chiasmic divergence from Afro-pessimism. Freud's notion of this feeling comes from his exchange with Romain Rolland, who tells Freud that "the true source of religious sentiments…consists in a peculiar feeling," which is "a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic.'"[65] Freud declares he "cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in" himself, but he understands this oceanic feeling to refer to "a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole."[66] Freud finds this notion troubling, for "an intimation" of "connection with the world…through an immediate feeling" seems to conflict "with the fabric of our psychology."[67] While critics have pointed to Freud's expansion of these ideas, including the proximity of his notion of the death drive to the oceanic feeling, I would argue that the "unbounded" sensation of this feeling resembles the shattering of the ego in melancholia.[68] Just as melancholic historicism and optimistic utopianism are two sides of the same coin, melancholia and the oceanic feeling can be seen as symmetrical inversions. I contend that Afro-pessimism often rejects what it sees as the oceanic feeling of optimism—what Warren refers to as "a festival of humanism"—only to confront an oceanic feeling associated with negation or nonbeing.[69] Freud's discussion is useful for pointing to one potential issue with Afro-pessimism from Best's point of view. Afro-pessimism, perhaps because of how seriously it considers "the ontology of Black

suffering,"[70] encounters an oceanic feeling produced by substantializing or "inhabiting" negativity. Warren and others affiliated with Afro-pessimism might therefore be read as melancholic in their ego-shattering attention to desubjectifying negation.

After his reading of Black Lives Matter, Warren offers an anecdote of his experience being invited to speak on "globalized sadism in the context of Michael Brown's murder and the police state."[71] He notes that this request filled him "with dread" because he "anticipated a festival of humanism in which presenters would share solutions to the problem of antiblackness (if they even acknowledged antiblackness) and inundate the audience with 'yes we can!' rhetoric and unbounded optimism."[72] This "unbounded optimism" seems another name for the oceanic feeling Freud links (through Rolland) to true religious sentiment. Warren's anxieties were confirmed, as he "listened to one speaker after the next describe a bright future, where black life is valued and blacks are respected as humans."[73] Following these presentations, Warren adheres to what he names his "*nihilistic responsibility*" and proclaims that there is "no solution to the problem of antiblackness; it will continue without end, as long as the world exists."[74] He furthermore criticizes the "humanist *affect* (the good feeling we get from hopeful solutions)" because it "will not translate into freedom, justice, recognition, or resolution."[75] As one might expect from this setup—or from one's own experience at (liberal) academic talks—this nihilistic response was not well-received, at least in the responses recorded by Warren. In a telling conclusion, Warren explains, "the intensity of the dialogic exchange taught me that *affect* runs both ways":

> It is not just that solutions make us feel good because we feel powerful/hopeful, but that pressing the ontological question presents *terror*—the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism.[76]

Despite this recognition that "*affect* runs both ways," the arguments that follow in *Ontological Terror* seem to repress this double directionality in favor of unidirectional claims about negativity. In other words, though Warren posits antiblackness as a structural antagonist of ontology, and of the world, he reifies this negativity into an inversion of the oceanic feeling—not one of optimism, but of pessimism. In contrast, Best's rhetorical readings develop an anti-communitarian impulse that avoids courting absolutes that potentially reify what they aim to oppose.

Conclusion: Aesthetic Life, Anaesthetic Death

By way of conclusion, I want to ask, is there something not just anarchival but anaesthetic that might be developed further from *None Like Us*, especially given its rhetorical investments that aim to disrupt allegorical and figurative readings? As I have already discussed, the suicide in chapter three has been read in error. But is suicide also that which points to an "error" inherent in aesthetic life? Best asks, "Could suicide represent a singular principle of negativity at the center of the order of history?" (94). To this rhetorical question, Best responds in the affirmative. Unlike Afro-pessimism's potential reification of negativity as absolute, as substance, Best suggests that negativity works for and within the order of history. Yet the negativity of suicide as such remains inaccessible to historical representation. Recall that Best describes a "*metalepsis of the subject*, where the slave makes himself once over from the stuff out of which he had been made" (105). Here it is clear that Best remains within the legible while gesturing to that which is illegible. Suicide, in this particular case and as the absent center of negativity around which this history revolves, can only be converted by interpretation into a meaningful act through a disavowal of its negativity. Even description would fail to account for this negativity, as it remains unreadable, indescribable. To draw on Lee Edelman's anti-social theory, we might say that this anaesthetic negativity registers "the unintelligible's

unintelligibility," that is, "the internal limit to signification and the impossibility of turning Real loss to meaningful profit in the Symbolic without its persistent remainder: the inescapable Real of the drive."[77] Best's suggestion that he may "have ended up creating a world that will no longer have me, as would be the point," might, then, be read alongside Warren's journey into the valley of death and Edelman's insistence on unintelligibility. There is something in Best's project that eludes aesthetic sense, something that exceeds the bounds of rhetoric even as it generates rhetorical movements. The suicide bombing as literal drive of Best's discussion in chapter three can only be inadequately represented by linguistic and rhetorical placeholders. Description still requires a mode of perceiving that converts the imperceptible, thereby generating "its persistent remainder."

What, then, do we make of this anti-communitarian undertone that Best follows? When reading Best's desire to create "a black politics that is not animated by a sense of collective condition or solidarity" (64), I hear an echo of Audre Lorde's famous question and provocation in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House": "although the Black panelist's paper ends on an important and powerful connection of love between women, what about interracial cooperation between feminists who don't love each other?"[78] This form of cooperation and its resulting community would not lead to a utopian "we" that disavows its constitutive divisions and irreconcilable differences. Best's anti-communal undertone can be read alongside Lorde's understanding of community with and of differences, a "we" that can never be what its grammar claims.[79] An anti-communal approach might not simply invest in "aesthetic life," then, but also in the anaesthetic death or negativity that continually displaces and defers that life. It is this anaesthetic gap on which aesthetics and rhetoric hinge.

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Notes

[1] Best, *None Like Us*, 1. All subsequent references to *None Like Us* will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

[2] Walker, *Appeal*, 21.

[3] While I routinely use "method" and "methodology" in this essay, Toril Moi has challenged literary studies on this front in *Revolution of the Ordinary* with the claim that literary studies has no method in the typical sense of that term (178).

[4] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 18.

[5] Best and Marcus, 9.

[6] Sumner, "The Turn Away from Marxism," 27, 41. Carolyn Lesjak offers a similar critique in "Reading Dialectically," especially when she writes, "what is needed is a better way of reading surfaces as perverse rather than as obvious, as never identical to themselves in their 'thereness,' and always found within and constitutive of complex spatial relations, both seen and not seen, deep and lateral, material and figural—all of which requires a more rather than less expansive reading practice: more interpretation, more dialectical complexity, a more rather than less invested critical position, because *relations*, after all, cannot be seen in any solely literal sense" (251).

[7] Sumner, 28.

[8] See Ellen Rooney's "Live Free or Describe" for a discussion of how Best and Marcus's "description" of Althusser's project in *Reading Capital* also "fails": "their description of symptomatic reading in Althusser's work does not—even on the most generous account—describe his intervention in either a complete or undistorted way" (126).

[9] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 18.

[10] I do not have the space to engage with several relevant and influential readings of this story, perhaps most obviously Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," Derrida's response to Lacan, and Barbara Johnson's response to both.

[11] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 18.

[12] John Vincler's use of "excavation" as an organizing metaphor for his recent discussion of Mark Bradford's art emphasizes the seductive power of such depth figures.

[13] Rooney, "Live Free or Describe," 126.

[14] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 18, my emphasis.

[15] Best and Marcus, 18, my emphasis.

[16] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243.

[17] Freud, 244. Recently, in *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han "depathologize" melancholia in their use of the concept to understand "the everyday, collective psychic struggles of Asian Americans" (25).

[18] Freud, 244.

[19] Freud, 244.

[20] In her critique of "black feminism's proprietary attachments to intersectionality," which force black feminists into a defensive "policing" of "intersectionality's usages," Jennifer C. Nash has also recently used the notion of "letting go" to represent "the political and theoretical worldview" in which "black feminist theory…is not invested in making property of knowledge" (*Black Feminism Reimagined* 3).

[21] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 75-76.
[22] Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 18.
[23] Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" 405.
[24] Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, qtd. in Best, 92.
[25] The refrain reads as follows: "'Take him to the Gulley! Take him to the Gulley! / But bringee back the frock and board.'— / 'Oh! massa, massa! me no deadee yet!'— / 'Take him to the Gulley! Take him to the Gulley!' / 'Carry him along!'" (Best 103).
[26] Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, qtd. in Best, 104.
[27] Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 128.
[28] Gates, 171-172.
[29] Gates, 172.
[30] Hartman, "Position of the Unthought," 184. See *Scenes of Subjection* for Hartman's extended critique of political agency and constructions of the subject dependent on will.
[31] Best also acknowledges that he "will not be concerned with sustaining a rigorously formal understanding of metalepsis." Instead, he aims "to follow this trope only into insights it may afford regarding the linguistic traces of the enslaved in the archive" (89).
[32] "Afro-pessimism" refers to a diverse set of practices; while I employ strategic generalizations in this section, I do not mean to imply that various critics—including Jared Sexton, Frank B. Wilderson III, and Calvin L. Warren—can be or ought to be read as part of a single project.
[33] Patterson, "Toward a Future That Has No Past," 46.
[34] Patterson, 61, 60.
[35] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 48.
[36] Warren, 52.
[37] Warren, 1.
[38] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 28. Rancière also prefaces this definition by acknowledging that he is renaming what commonly goes by the name politics.
[39] Charles Linscott's recent engagement with Black Lives Matter as a "politico-ontological" intervention "concerned, quite literally, with life" nicely expresses an indistinction between politics and ontology (108).
[40] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 89.
[41] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 11.
[42] Mirzoeff, *Appearance of Black Lives Matter*, 137.
[43] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 29.
[44] Rancière, *Method of Equality*, 162.
[45] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 172.
[46] Warren, 172. My claim about Warren and the following argument are indebted to Lee Edelman's "Being/Divided."
[47] Warren, 3. As part of his critique, Warren names "the increasing death toll, the unchecked power of the police state, the lack of conviction rates for police murdering blacks, the prison industrial complex and the modern reenslavement of an entire generation, the unbelievable black infant mortality rate, the lack of jobs for black youth and debilitating poverty" (3-4).
[48] Wright, *Physics of Blackness,* 8.
[49] A more elaborate consideration of Warren's use of "function" exceeds the scope of this essay. I will note, however, that there is a tension between Warren's Lacanian and Heideggerian influences. Warren's insistence on ontology, for instance, conflicts with—or contorts—the Lacanian insistence, even with its own indebtedness to Heidegger, that "being is merely presumed in certain words…it is but a fact of what is said" (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 118). In his use of function, he reveals not only a

terminological difference from Best, but also the very theoretical difference between the two that I highlight in his focus on ontology rather than rhetoric.
[50] Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 119.
[51] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 5.
[52] Warren, 147.
[53] Warren, 147.
[54] Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 120-21.
[55] An exception would be psychosis, in which the primary signifier is foreclosed and the three registers do come unknotted. This informs Warren's work, which is most explicit in his dissertation, *The Absent Center of Political Ontology: Ante-bellum Free Blacks and Political Nothingness*.
[56] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 30.
[57] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 150.
[58] Moten, *Universal Machine*, 145. See the entirety of the essay, "Chromatic Saturation," for Moten's elaborate address of his own relation to the Afro-pessimism of Sexton and Wilderson.
[59] Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 69.
[60] Sexton, 69.
[61] Sexton, 69.
[62] Sexton, 69.
[63] Moten, *Universal Machine*, 195-196.
[64] "Beside" refers to Best's allusion to Sedgwick cited earlier, while "dispossession" and "nothingness" refer to Moten's discussion of Afro-pessimism (230).
[65] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 64.
[66] Freud, 65.
[67] Freud, 65.
[68] For one example of such a critic, see Sarah Ackerman.
[69] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 2. Leo Bersani suggests an affiliation between nonbeing and melancholy when he writes, "The feeling inherent in this encompassing nonbeing at the heart of being can perhaps be called melancholy" (*Receptive Bodies* 107).
[70] Sharpe and Terrefe, "What Exceeds the Hold," 100.
[71] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 2.
[72] Warren, 2.
[73] Warren, 2.
[74] Warren, 3. This echoes Walker's passaged cited by Best: "I pray God that none like us may live again until time shall be no more" (21).
[75] Warren, 3.
[76] Warren, 4.
[77] Edelman, *No Future*, 106-107.
[78] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 113.
[79] This may also be read in terms of what Rancière designates the dissensual community. In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Rancière writes, "A *political* community is in effect a community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself" (115).

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