



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## THE POETICS OF THE BLACK CORPSE AND THE *URBILD* OF POLITICS

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I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thoughts; I think of what I am where I  
do not think to think.

Jacques Lacan ([1966] 2006), *Ecrits*

On the subject of hatred, we're so deadened [...] that no one realizes that a  
hatred, a solid hatred, is addressed to being, to the very being of someone that is  
not necessarily God.

Jacques Lacan ([1973] 1999, *Seminar XX*)

The object of one's hatred is never, alas, conveniently outside [...] but is seated in  
one's lap [...] stirring in one's bowels and dictating the beat of one's heart.

James Baldwin (1985), "Here be Dragons"

### Part I: Den

A lair, hole, pit, cell, or cavity; what constitutes a den escapes the chasm between nothings, forever evading the grasp of inscription. Cloaked in the refusal of the signifier as its condition of impossibility, the void as nothingness registers a singular site of its illegibility. Hidden within ontology's demand for meaning, figuration favors nothing over blackness: nothing as a signpost of value, nothing as a number, zero, and nothingness, or non-being, as the mark of the sacrifice to which death awaits itself. The void Democritus endeavors to expound via his concept of the "den,"

characterized by Lacan as “not *perhaps nothing*, but *not nothing*” (Lacan [1973] 1998, 64) echoes notions of not only singularity and purity, but also the multiple(s)—whether coded as atom or number. For zero, like nothingness, non-being, negation, and negativity, functions as both a vacancy and an ontic counting of nothing. A den, or void, sustained by the symbolics of nothing(ness) and not-being, shadows black suffering in the discourses of not only love and hate, but also pure possibility: politics and desire.

Violence obscured by enjoyment, pleasure masked as hatred, rapture immune to the destabilization that less than nothing entails, the very light that serves as a guide to the den is none other than the legibility of predation. Herein both the black corpse and politics synthesize a site of inscription: the repetition and reproduction of metaphysics. Specifically, the political as violence cloaked in law, in the language of the good, of means and ends, of both dialectics and metaphysics. It is the lie of the good masked as truth, and the fabrication of truth as the contestation of unfreedom. Politics that allows one the conceits of a chimerical unburdening of the *real* in a phantasmatic unfolding, if not occupation, of ethics. Meaning, philosophy posturing as politics, through concepts such as ontology, lack, or the sublime, reaps similarly meager outcomes in shifting social conditions as any politic that presents itself as antidote to the externalized drama of a collective anti-black psyche. Accordingly, blackness can neither be the antagonist alternative of the political, nor agonist of nothingness. Rather, blackness shadows. Trespassing and sustaining politics as both *sinthome* and letter, a phantasmatic *Wiederholungszwang* (Freud [1937] 1964, 146–56) conceals black grief as belonging—a possession, perhaps, of truth, or an Other. But to what place, at what degree, and to which situation does this compulsion apparition itself? To enjoy and withhold the despised object confirms its suspension in a phantomed satiety of prohibition: global desire saturated in the semiotics of an other’s deprivation, cyphered in chrono-phantasmagoric exaltations of blackness as its remains.

### **Repetition, Compulsion, Desire**

A high-rise in Kuwait City and a canal in Venice; the extent of exposure and depths of field rely on enjoyment, on one hand, and on the other, (im)possibility—its prefiguration. The aperture of the imagination triangulates the former, possibility, in the eclipse of a single lens, its cadence suggestive of an unremitting reproduction which is also its interruption. The canal seems quiet, black skin on water gilded, blackened by its shallow depths. Blackened water made darker in contrast with the sun, a man drowns while onlookers record and taunt racial abuse. “Africa! Africa!” “Let him die,” they yell, laughing while jeering “Go back home,” “Piece of shit” (“African Refugee Drowns” 2017). Twenty-two-year-old Pateh Sabally, a vulnerable immigrant from Gambia, must have been paralyzed by icy water barely reaching five degrees Celsius. He drowns in front of dozens of onlookers who watch and record his death, shouting “He is stupid. He wants to die” (Ibid.). In a seemingly parallel chrono-*political* dimension, an Ethiopian domestic worker in Kuwait City hangs from the window of the seventh floor of a multi-story building. Like Sabally, Adesech Sadik is accused of attempting suicide, yet she seemingly lives, if one can call the kafala system a life, graced—believed by some—with another (or is it always the inertia prior to the first?) chance to live.

Imagine the growing cacophony as its inverse drowns out the sound, upon sinking, of the breath stopping; Sabally's heart beats no longer as Sadik's fingers grip tightly. Her Kuwaiti captress videotapes, like the ingenue she envisions herself to be in her dreams, stepping back and watching the young woman hold on to the window with her right hand. The air in the Sabah el-Salem area of the city fills with Sadik's faint cries beseeching, "Hold me! Hold me!", as preamble to her screams (Shaban and Rahman 2017). Her fingers ultimately slip. She falls yet fails to transform into the black corpse of her employer-cum-videographer's imagination. Treated by paramedics, Sadik lives to tell the truth: "I wasn't trying to commit suicide, I was trying to escape from the woman who tried to kill me" (Ibid.). Whether "forcibly thrown" from a window in Kuwait or left to die in Venice's Grand Canal in Italy, without grief recognized as anything but a demand, a need, to reclaim what was taken yet never bestowed, one cannot pass down what the ancestors currently share. Ancestry without birthright and alienation<sup>1</sup> without natality<sup>2</sup> anchor in not only the performances of a past, but also a collective mourning, without community, for a future denied access to its mirror inscription. In other words, a repetition of death's thetic character condenses into a poetics averse to both the melancholy of grief and investiture in mourning.

In each of these cases, the focus is on watching/seeing and putatively hearing—the dream of a hypotyposis that could inscribe its symptom as metaphor. Both incidents filmed, the active exercise of decoding and encoding the semiotics of pleasure, consumption, and enjoyment. The boundary between viewer and black object of consumption is ineluctably impermeable. Namely, there is no defined limit for feasting upon black objects of desire: an enjoyment persistently indulged in without reservation. We read, we write, we claim to listen, chasing flight into what could never be rendered as possibility. The poetics of the black corpse is its tropological impress that effaces distinction, necropolitical or otherwise. It is neither a negative image nor a positive picture, a circumspection of its obverse, inverse, and reverse. The idea of its being anything but the *real* is both the *Urbild* of its thetic narrative and the principles of a politic.

To this end, there is no inhibition regarding the black body. The inclination toward its hatred is symptomatic of how hate, like love, can only be inscribed. Put differently, one is subject to hate, to antiblack violence, via hypotyposis, its mark. To think it reprehensible, an impossible knowing, its viewing is both a baptism into white supremacy *and* antiblackness: the positive of its negative, erasure in its wake. However, love, like hate, also requires an inscription, what poses as evasion. To defer is simply to breathe, to refuse the contamination of air in its stead. Presuming an impossibility other than materiality, death, in lieu of phantasmic potentiality, shrouds its poetics while murder, what is unimaginable, predicates what can be—that of suicide, its attempts, and failures. Who can say a calculated murder is executed under the auspices of cold, rather than warm, blood? What and why must the temperate nature of cruelty rest in the icy depths attributed to arctic conditions when they also constitute the foundations of poetics: Aristotle's position on the dominance of tragedy over the inferiority of the lyric. For something to be murdered and bequeathed as such it must have been birthed, which is not the same as being born—a twofold process.<sup>3</sup> Murder involves being (as in the present and past—being born) and birth, rather than the nomenclature of nothingness and death. The difference: one cannot murder what has been birthed, as one *can* those who were born. What we bring to bear, what has been opposed to what

has been borne, what has been borne by body and psyche, is incomparable on and to the scales of imagination regardless of the attendant discussion of poetics and aesthetics.

But what reduces the contradictory imperatives within—to abolish and suspend, to preserve and transcend—through an anorexic moral judgement that camouflages an imperative to love? To love precisely whom? Or the command to hate—blackness as the object par excellence of white supremacy, the question that has yet to be posed. Can one love absolute dereliction without a Manichean transformation and its necessity to mask love or hate for oneself *as* other—for the other as a reflection, rather than constitution, of an absence of self? Moreover, if the “imponderable is death, whose real grounding is that it cannot be pondered” (Lacan [1966] 2006, 106) then grounded within the *mise-en-scène* of black death and the metonymics of its disavowal in the geometry of truth, possibility, and its deferral in speech and action represent the thetic character of both language and politics. Lacking the judicial authority to condemn or agency to demand, blackness traverses as an ineluctable provocation: the repetition of figuration’s refusal. Blackness in the realm of ontology suffers its aftermath without a genesis. It is the indeterminate place and moment when history, violence, and their global politics submerge, like an “O without a figure” (Shakespeare [1606] 1992, 1.4.152). To posit transcendence in the viscous chasm that only nothingness has the potential to cede.

## Part II: Corpse

The following words introduce blackness against a white screen, or paper, displacing that which is unthinkable and what predicates the imaginable: a futility that conjures, reproduces, and eclipses the assumption of its prohibition. Neither thing nor hole, what Lacan describes in relation to the death drive as “real inasmuch as it can only be pondered *qua* impossible” (Lacan [1966] 2006, 106), there are no remnants of the black corpse within the *Urbild* of politics – a language sustained by the terror of aporetics it avers. The aim here, perhaps, is to introduce what could only be a perpetual possibility, of unknowing. The dead-and-undead, among the lifeless, parade the sign: a repetition arrested in its endless deferral of an indispensable psyche, engaged in war with its ruins—a self, dissevered and sedimented in its declivity.

Unlike the Cartesian subject of repetition noted in the first epigraph, violence, rather than the difference between statement and enunciation, engineers the structure of the split black subject. Specifically, the veiling of blackness’ ambivalence regarding liberation from its requisite objection. The last epigraph, published two years before James Baldwin’s death, serves in this same vein. Toying with the phantasmatic division of inside and outside, Baldwin discloses a profound awareness that hatred, like love, hatred *as* love, hatred *metaphorized* and *metamorphosed* as love “dictates” the twin seats occupying the deepest level of interiority—bowels and the heart. Governed by the external command to love and hate, a command from what is all but perfunctory divinity, the one in the position of loving that which is most hated, loving from the position of most hated, hates to the extent that one’s ability to love is enervated from a position of constant descent into what has only be conceived as nothingness. Within the surface of embodiment, whiteness has already dissipated an interior whose externalization marks a gratuitous need for its embodiment.

In other words, corresponding drives for recognition and misrecognition refract with, and without, relation. This is the materiality of the psyche's appetite. War cloaked as an abhorrence for violence, for a reward of a phantasmatic horizon of an Other, for a chance to alchemize disintegration into disalienation: a promise that could shoulder, if not replace, perception beyond sensation.

But what if the injunction to love *something*, not *anything*, is a *perpetual war couched in the politics of the dead body*? Bereft of articulation or semblance outside of this figurative stamp, the black corpse's immateriality proves indispensable to the reality and lie of the real. A mystified call for mastery—for sublation into a fantasy of agency, wholeness. That is, one's capacity to hate rather than one's propensity for dreaming awakens a drive that entails both Eros and Thanatos, not a bifurcation of the two. Yet this conjunction of drives, their irresolution and reputed incommensurability in the Imaginary and Symbolic, are enervated solely by the vigor of their promises of love—which is to say, both whiteness and its capacity to reconstitute hate as the arbiter of ontological peace. A hypotyposis through the poetics of the black corpse inscribes a diacritical juncture that forges meaning through its dual reproduction as both impossibility and the chiasmatic imaginary of its legacy.

Meaning, desire's evasion, circumvention's perpetual desire in flight, bolsters the conception of black death's immovable articulation as impossibility. The ground, the hypotyposis of black death is none other than the figuration of black life, foreshadowed in the fantasies and desires of those who refuse to hear yet see; for they are readers in all respects. Accordingly, the symptom undergirding metaphor, or the displacements buttressing metonymy's presumed foreclosure, catenates in a phantasmatic assumption of being. Represented but loathe to figuration, literality, and therefore *Abbild*, Blackness is a nothingness that is neither wholly one nor entirely an other. Rather, "*it is not a μηδέν [mêden], but a δέν [den]*" (Lacan [1973] 1998, 64). Specifically, it is subjection to widespread abuse, death, shame, and honor killings *for* anything other than black: killings devoid of honor but carried out in the name of the honorable, phenomena that collectively shape and define it as such.

### Part III: The God Matrix

Now, they say we write beautiful poetry. Something historically attributed to blackness—that is, mimicry or imitation—can now proudly claim to have mastered the master art. Poetics involves the act of catharsis, if successful, and for centuries the black corpse has provided the medium, object, and mode of cathartic and imitative art—unimaginable, impossible murder of that which is both yet to begin and has yet to depart.

For instance, an unpoetic absolute or contingent proposition: animals consume what they kill. This statement is as categorically true as it is a natural truth for a contingent proposition: the taxonomy that ranks and classifies all Mammalia. But which animals display their kills? Which mammals hide their carrion? All following methods of consumption—deferred, immediate, plot driven, and performative—are exhibited by those who excel at predation. More specifically, those for whom predation marks as the *sine qua non* of the "human, after man" (Wynter 2003).

Antiblackness and white supremacy, as twin precepts, share an ambivalence toward neither love nor hate. Instead, they apportion *jouissance* for all except for that which hatred and love have decimated. In other words, the split subject that devastates the distinctions between life and death. Those who obliterate the ostensibly transparent meanings behind liminality and fissure. A chasm within the void, nothingness without *das ding*, the politics of the black body are the poetics of its chrono-resistant corpse.

But what if, or of, this is the profound ambivalence of love? Or, to speak more plainly and risk losing the precision that the language of black desire requires, how hatred and love share an ambivalent relationship with blackness. Freedom to X, liberation from Y—both distinct and irreducible demands since freedom, in the sense of both positive and negative law, is perhaps the mythic violence that Benjamin categorizes as law-making and law-preserving. Therefore, blackness's potential is nothing but the profundity and profanity of thought. The only mode and manner of theorizing that threatens to annihilate law through preserving its devastation. A messianism with neither a messiah nor a sovereign, violence without judgement, without the weight, the gaze, the ethics of psycho-political freedom that can only be imagined through the position of the subject—a projection of god, of the divine.

Hence, a project of freedom imagined, in and through a hinderance of imagination, a corruption of dreams, which is to say a corruption of love for hatred against the master signifier, against god, against the white master-divinity-god matrix comprising the drive, the agony and intoxicating goal to be white or die trying within the semiotics of the black corpse. A goal of which even whiteness anxiously protects, in its *jouissance*, its hatred of blackness. Hatred is awakening to the nightmare that blackness experiences anything but—because her nothingness of non-being is necessitated by her constitution as an object of hatred. To wit, hatred is dually posited as an external imposition ventriloquized by black desire and demand, while simultaneously understood as a demand for freedom, for recognition, for freedom *from* recognition as the violent unconscious desire that interrupts demand.

Differently put, a repetition compulsion to implore our freedom, even going to war, as an interruption as much as an instantiation of desire. For our desire for freedom is externalized as a resistance to war while demonstrating an acquiescence to its exposition of the object against which a war of all against all could be waged: a resistance to embracing war signals the internalization of hatred without political e/affect. Internal or external to war, or battle, hatred is situated, substitutes, and inserts a self where nothing empties into its abyss. Hence, neither hysterical symptom nor lexical access to the visual codes of black suffering prevent its legibility. Sabally's guileless murder and Sadik's forced obeisance to survivance's wile perform King Lear's command to Cordelia: "Nothing will come of nothing, speak again" (Shakespeare [1606] 1992, 1.1.85). Because nothing can be spoken or written, the death of the signifier and death prior to signification converge on a horizontal metonymic axis that removes Sabally and Sadik from any record of time, if not preventing its initial recording. The black corpse provides cover for not an absence of life, but instead a politically proscribed refusal of a chance to live life, to experience mortality in death—death as permanence that is bestowed freely to any other. Without a beginning or possibility of

becoming, the insistence on blackness as sacrifice results in the reiterative act of its killing: a repetition in both substitution and phantasy. And if the unconscious, like language, is sutured to the former's opacity and the latter's insufficiency, then regardless of the promises of the forgeries of risk—its hopes elided in the transparency of claims to a negative drive—it is not only the real that is unthinkable. Blackness is the urtext of what one can never know and yet only think itself as unknowable.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Orlando Patterson's seminal study, *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), discusses natality and alienation in the context of slavery. He notes the following insights: "Slaves also differ from contracted athletes and bond servants in their alienation from all ties of natality and in their lack of honor and publicly recognized repute" (26). Furthermore, "Institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality as well as honor and power. It was in this too that the master's authority rested. For it was he who in a godlike manner mediated between the socially dead and the socially alive" (46).

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt ([1958] 2013) conceives of natality as a critical facet of a human's capacity as political being: "the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought" (9).

<sup>3</sup> Arendt's political philosophy of natality reflects much of Western metaphysical thought's production of discursive categories that determine life and death. For her, natality is "ontologically rooted": "It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born" ([1958] 2013, 247).

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## Biography

Dr. Selamawit D. Terrefe was a scholar of unparalleled brilliance and a fearless critic of anti-Blackness. Her groundbreaking research on anti-black violence transformed academic discourse and called us to action. Selamawit's revolutionary spirit extended far beyond her scholarship—she was a loving wife, loyal friend, devoted mentor, and guiding force in the lives of many.

Her voice, laughter, and sharp wit will be profoundly missed, but her legacy endures in her students, her writings, and the countless lives she impacted. As we honor her, we remain guided by her unwavering commitment to truth and liberation.

We invite you to celebrate her life and contributions by reading [her obituary](#) and joining us in carrying her light forward.

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