

# A Fatal Necessity: *Absent Presence and Assimilation as Obliteration*

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Today, the watchword is not entanglement but transparency.  
– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone.  
– Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

## State of Exception

In the eighth thesis of his late text “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” Walter Benjamin puts forward what is perhaps the greatest insight to be gained from his body of work: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ [*Ausnahmezustand*] in which we live, is the rule” (1991, 697; my translation). Taking this remark as our departure, we can try to gain an insight into the fundamental constitutive analytic of European post-Enlightenment modernity as an ‘exception.’ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2021, 27-28) describe the instantiation of this ordering exception in a passage that is worth quoting at length. They write:

What is implied in imagining that one has become (exceptional)? There will have been the gift of Europe of its own place, at once insular and unlimited, and its own singular and subdivisible time. This transcendental honorarium, wherein gift is conceptualized as the given and the given is conceptualized as gift, will have granted Europe (the) world as the place and time of exception. But someone will have had to except Europe, to allow the constantly emergent state of its exception, to sacralize its politico-theological ground and atmosphere. Someone will have had to give to Europe(ans) the capacity to be one. (Some)one will have given man the power of being one, a completeness that will have been as if it were given.

Someone will have had to except Europe. Harney and Moten here point to the fundamental fracture that needed to take place for Europe to come into place, to come into its particular place of/as exception. This fracture is based on the need to designate an Other of Europe, to bring into signification groups that are distinguished from proper (Euro-white) subjectivity, most importantly as those that do not *own*. This speciation is described similarly by McKenzie Wark (2004, §177), who notes: “Property founds subjectivity as the relation between possession and nonpossession.”<sup>1</sup>

Meaning comes into being through differentiation (Hall 1997, 234). The meaning of an exceptional Europe necessitates the designation of a nonpossessing Other, of the others that Europe excepts itself from (Fanon 2004, 5). This mythic lawmaking of Europe as ‘the One’ over and against ‘the Other’ can only affirm itself by repeating this instituting violence (Derrida 1996, 79; Benjamin 2004, 248). This exception is a racialized dynamic of *dis-identification*, where the completeness of full humanity that is reserved for whiteness, depends on the less-than-human status of blackness (Weheliye 2002, 27; cf. Trouillot 2015, 76, 81). This is also the dynamic that Edward Said (2003) describes in his classic work *Orientalism*. There, he notes how it is the Orient, as *European production*, that has defined Europe, or the

<sup>1</sup> In which this is also, crucially, to be understood as self-possession.

West. The latter needs the Orient as its negative to define itself. As Said writes: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (40).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Europe’s Other is the exception to the exception that proves the rule, the state of exception that is the rule (cf. Agamben 2005, 40). The founding of Euro-white modernity relies on this “coterminous birth of Man and his Others” as his constitutive outside (Yusoff 2018, 55). There is, then, the European interior on the one hand, and its outside on the other. Though one cannot subsume this relationship of inside/outside under one of its terms, their autonomous and coherent presence as binary opposites is false and cannot be sustained. Both of its signifiers are mutually dependent and do not have a claim to completeness, to presence as such, to being one. They exist, and can only ever exist, as a relation of *supplementarity*. In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida (1997, 144-5) describes such a relation as follows:

the supplement ... harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. ... But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*suppleant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place* [*tient-lien*]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness.

It is important to note the destabilizing potential that exists at the heart of the supplement. It is through the Other’s absent presence not only that Europe comes into being, it is also this ‘subaltern instance’ that has the latent explosivity capable of dislodging said European post-Enlightenment order. Crucially, in constituting itself as exception, Europe grants an originary power to its supplementary Other. The exception is haunted, always and forever (Bouteldja 2016, 40-41). The exception is indefensible (Césaire 2000, 32). Following Derrida, Miranda Joseph (2002, 2) notes how in such a relationship the

supplement to the structure supplants that structure; insofar as the structure depends on this constitutive supplement, the supplement becomes the primary structure itself; its own logic becomes, or at least may become, dominant or destabilizing, a blockage to the continuity, a sign of crisis or incompleteness.

Derrida (1997, 144) indeed calls the supplement “a fatal necessity.” For racialized others that are forced to bear the brutal gift of Europe’s exception, their *dis*-place of emptiness is the haunting void that exposes the fragility at the heart of the Euro-white structure. Attending to this fragility is made possible through the notion of supplementarity. This approach is different from traditional (Hegelian) dialectics, destabilizing the totalizing and binary presence of contradictions and instead focusing on the excess, the aporetic absent presence that ultimately escapes subsumption. As Christina Sharpe (2016, 4) writes in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*: “even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply or only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected” (cf. Wang 2023, 200). The ordering subjection of a

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<sup>2</sup> Another way in which this becomes apparent is the “integration” discourse in a nation such as The Netherlands. “Integration,” whether it is used to discuss migrants, incarcerated people, or another group of people deemed insufficient in some way, works as a diagrammatical, operative notion that produces “society” and/through its (racialized) others that are not (yet) “integrated” and exist outside “society” (Schinkel 2008, 39; cf. Wekker 2016, 7, 21).

structure that is unable to determine *absolutely* the modalities of supplementary displaced life “also produces Black resistances and refusals” (Sharpe 2016, 124).<sup>3</sup>

### Racial Exteriority, Transparent Interiority

It is the above described dynamic of dis-identification and supplementarity, of the exceptional European interior and its othered outside, that is the subject of Denise Ferreira da Silva’s book *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007). Outlining the conditions of the production of modern subjects, she traces how an order of raciality “institutes the global as an ontoepistemological context – a productive and violent gesture necessary to sustain the post-Enlightenment version of the Subject as the sole self-determined thing.” (xii-xiii). Self-determination becomes the prerogative of European post-Enlightenment subjectivity through an *analytics of raciality* that distinguishes self-determined subjects (man that is one) from those that Da Silva calls the ‘others of Europe,’ who are ‘outer-determined.’ This prerogative of man is sustained only in reference to these others. The ontological context for which this racial order is constitutive is one of *globality*, which produces these two different “coexisting and relational” types of modern subjects as properties of different global regions. Where the ‘others of Europe’ are *affectable* – that is, subject to/of outer determination – the Euro-white subjects that are granted the status of ‘man’ are written in *transparency*. Universal reason, for the self-owning subjects of transparency, is “an interior guide,” while for subjects of affectability it “remains an exterior ruler” (xxxix). The racial, as a strategy of power, is deployed to (re)produce this “founding modern ontological statement” (xiv).

The supposedly self-determined European subject is thus in its own right outer-determined by its necessary others, even though it, in the words of Derrida (1997, 144), “claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself.” This *transparent T* makes a false claim to the position of “absolute referent ... that precedes and institutes signification” (Da Silva 2007, 26). A claim that is false, as this subject of transparency cannot exist without “its productive violent act” which institutes others and at the same time relegates these others to an absence, threatens them, places them before the horizon of death (26-8). It “brings into existence, and disavows, that which signifies ‘other’-wise, announcing its necessary elimination” (xiv). This shows the importance of the notion of supplementarity in understanding this racial-global order. It enables us to see the necessary violent interdependence central to this state of exception, while at the same time revealing the lynchpin of ‘other’-ness and exteriority to be a fatal vulnerability.<sup>4</sup>

The exceptional particularity of Europe is haunted by its ghostly others, the absent presence of the other-wise modes of being, the gift that it needs but cannot bear (cf. Harney and Moten 2013, 26). Within the modern economy of signification, Da Silva identifies the supplementary haunting that the other-wise forms for the transparent subject in universal reason. That universal reason was articulated to emphasize the particularity of the transparent Euro-white subject. However, the same universality immediately needed to be disavowed, so as to not threaten the self-determination that this transparent subject was awarded – its most important attribute (Da Silva 2007, 30). Universal reason threatens “the self-unfolding, self-representing, transcendental ‘I’” that is marked by self-determination (39). The endeavor to secure

<sup>3</sup> Fred Moten (2022) has described the project of the Black radical tradition as a project wherein histories of brutal displacement become activated as radical project of liberation by undermining the normative modern self-possessed spatial settler-subject (cf. Sharpe 2016, 22, 76; Yusoff 2018, xi). Following Moten and others, blackness is here understood not as identity but as relation (of nonnormative subjectivity) (Yusoff 2018, xii, 19, 56; on the Black radical tradition, see also Davis 2016, 39, 112).

<sup>4</sup> As Derrida writes: “As soon as there is the One, there is murder, wounding, traumatism. *L’Un se garde de l’autre*. The One guards against/ keeps some of the other. It protects *itself* from the other, but, in the movement of this jealous violence, it comprises in itself, thus guarding it, the self-otherness of self-difference (the difference from within oneself) which makes it One. The ‘One differing, deferring from itself.’ The One as the Other. At once, at the same time, but in a same time that is out of joint, the One forgets to remember itself to itself, it keeps and erases the archive of this injustice that it is. Of this violence that it does. *L’Un se fait violence*. The One makes itself violence. It violates and does violence to itself but it also institutes itself as violence. It becomes what it is, the very violence – that it does to itself. Self-determination as violence” (Derrida 1996, 78).

self-determination in interiority and shield it against exteriority is insecure, the excepted and transparent subject is haunted by the above discussed ontological primacy the outside/exterior necessarily acquires (41).

This haunting is a threat of affectability, that undermines the position of the Euro-white subject as non-affectable, transparent, owning, self-determined. What is necessary, then, is a disavowal of exteriority that professes its ontological irrelevance and places the ontological primacy on the interior thing, the mind (42-44). Through figures such as Descartes, Leibniz, Herder and Kant, Da Silva analyzes modern philosophy and science as an attempt at grappling with this threat of affectability. This leads up to Hegel, whose philosophical contribution to this problem is a reconciliation of interiority and exteriority through *transcendental poesis*, in which exteriority becomes but a moment in the interior trajectory, universal reason domesticated as interior-temporal force of transparency. This is a ‘strategy of engulfment,’ which engulfs universal reason into the historicity of self-determined autonomous man. Hegel fashions exteriority as a moment in a trajectory towards transparent self-consciousness, with reason becoming an attribute of not just any human, but those specific Euro-white temporal-historical-spatial subjects that have attained transparency and self-determination, as well as their corresponding “post-enlightenment European social configurations” (85). The ‘others of Europe,’ unable to attain this transparency, subjected as they are to exterior determination, are left to dwell in affectability. But still, this attempt to make autonomous the exception that comes into being only through its Other, can never fully succeed. Exteriority persists, exteriority haunts (71). Any attempt to defend Europe is doomed. Meanwhile, it is within this fatal necessity that we live and die, within the necessary fatality that marks the murderous brutality of the exception’s failure (Harney and Moten 2021, 30; Wekker 2016, 44; Césaire 2000, 31).

### Obliterating Inclusion

Da Silva describes the dual strategy of the modern racial order as *engulfment* and *murder*. The latter is obvious, there is direct physical destruction, material annihilation, total obliteration. We can see this clearly, right now, when looking at the genocide in Gaza, where ‘affectable others’ are getting murdered in huge numbers. What I want to focus on, however, is the analysis of engulfment. What Da Silva puts forward is a radical critique of inclusion, one in which assimilation is to be read as *a modality of obliteration*.

Audre Lorde (2019, 108) notes how “institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people.” This rejection of difference as engulfment, alongside and as a particular form of obliteration, shows how in many instances, racialized violence happens precisely through a certain inclusion. The color line is not simply an outcome of colonial power structures, it is also what Houria Bouteldja (2024, 22) describes as “a technique for the expropriation or extraction of surplus value” (cf. Yusoff 2018, 33). Under the necropolitics of racial capitalism, racialized others are, as non/beings, “always available to and for death” (Sharpe 2016, 86). Their lives are disposable as well as exploitable, “the two logics reinforce and are bound up with each other,” as Jackie Wang writes (2018, 88, 123). In this way, organized abandonment can appear as a form of inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Something perhaps most apparent in imprisonment, that possibility of total inclusion within state power that makes up a social death in which one’s outsideness is most starkly and violently produced, about which Angela Davis (2003, 16) has said that it “has become a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited.”

<sup>5</sup> In her book *Carceral Capitalism*, Wang (2018) for instance describes predatory lending as a form of “*expropriation through financial inclusion*” (70, 134). This she discusses as “racialized accumulation by dispossession” (114). In a different vein, in her text “Eating the Other,” bell hooks (1992) elaborates on the violence of inclusion through commodification and fetishization of otherness, where imperial white male desire, the racist fascination with the other as an exciting, intense and adventurous play-thing can even be presented as affirmation of an open-minded or “multicultural” tolerance. While it ultimately depends on racial differentiation, and produces and affirms the subordination that lies in this assertion of difference, it maintains a view of itself as positive inclusion (cf. Wekker 2016, 136).

### The Logic of Exclusion

Da Silva (2007) shows how much of the approaches to racial subjection assist the obliteration of the ‘others of Europe’ by relying on, repeating and affirming the violent logic of transparency and self-determination (cf. Sharpe 2016, 13). For this, Da Silva takes aim at what she calls “the sociohistorical logic of exclusion” as a mode of inclusion that is obliterating. This logic supposedly critically addresses racial subjection, but does so through a liberal logic that actually keeps the ontological framework of raciality intact and reproduces its violence. While “any radical remapping of the contemporary global configuration should neither rely on nor reassemble universality and historicity,” this logic is an attempt at writing subaltern modern subjects into these positions of universality, historicity and transparency (Da Silva 2007, 34). It reproduces the logic of the autonomous and self-determined subject, the liberal-historical being of the “individual” (xxx, 3). This is an attempt “to write the ‘others of Europe’ as always already historical subjects ... to capture a moment before racial subjection, where they are already historical, enjoying transparency before engulfment” (178). What this logic of emancipation as entry into universality fails to recognize is the antecedent of not the uncorrupted universal transparency of the ante-racial subject prior to the misfortune of violence, but precisely of the necessary and violent inscription of the ‘Other’ into the universal as, in the words of Kathryn Yusoff (2018, 51), “*a space of privileged subjectification.*” There will be no emergence of a transparent subject once the veil of oppression is lifted (Da Silva 2007, 266).

According to Da Silva, these “sociologies” present a particular kind of obliteration through assimilation, in which eschatologically, the racial and cultural difference of the Other has to be wiped out as it presents an affectability incompatible with the transparent (Euro-white) society (155-9).<sup>6</sup> This is suggesting that “the racial subaltern’s desire for emancipation ... is fundamentally a desire for self-obliteration” (160). In the final analysis, a “proper modern social configuration” is deemed identical with “universality and self-determination” (165). Calls for inclusion, as such, are calls for annihilation.

In contrast with the prophets of inclusion, Da Silva repeatedly emphasizes how (global) subjects do not “precede their emergence in representation” but precisely “emerge in signification” (27).<sup>7</sup> The racially constituted modern subject of globality is not an actually, really existing transparent liberal subject that has been misapprehended through ideological appropriation, as “if before racial violence there is a pristine black subject fully enjoying its ‘humanity’” (8). The cultural, the racial and the nation are instead to be viewed as *productive* (7). These strategies of power produce, rather than respond to, racial signifiers as actually-existing substantive differences (296). Yet the logic of exclusion, presuming empirical blackness, anticipates a real basis upon which oppression acts, and thus is a woefully inadequate mode of analysis, unable “to comprehend how the analytics of raciality operates as a political-symbolic arsenal” (133). Subjection becomes, in this view, an unfortunate exclusion from universality that is the result of erroneous perceptions of certain physical traits (xxxiv, 7).

This is why the reformist discourse of ex/inclusion is so bothersome to Da Silva. In its insistence on seeing racism as an effect of nineteenth-century ‘pseudo-science,’ it makes clear the stakes it adheres to. It presupposes “that the racial is extraneous to modern thought” (2). Within this logic of exclusion, race appears merely as a ruse of reason, an obstacle to be dealt with on the road of progress towards

<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the cultural is not the quick fix to raciality that some take it to be. For Da Silva (2007), cultural difference is only a reconfiguration of the racial, yet another strategy of engulfment (xxiii, 139). This approach reproduces the racial, is yet another moment of it, through presupposing the existence of an actually existing and “irreducible and unoblatably difference between the kinds of minds indigenous to Europe and those that originated in other global regions” (133, 151).

<sup>7</sup> As Judith Butler (2007) has famously shown, gendered subjects also do not precede their gendered articulation but rather are produced as naturalized “prediscursive” gendered subjects through the law-making violence of their performative, discursive assertion as such. They write: “The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object” (xv).



transparency. But this obstacle cannot be cleared away; this road, of historicity and temporality, is itself a product of the analytics of raciality. Instead of innocently encountering and either accidentally misinterpreting or malignantly exploiting racial difference as a given, this analytic itself conjures up the differences through which global subjects come to be apprehended. As a strategy of power, the racial then retroactively establishes its own ground (Derrida 1992, 14). Returning to Said (2003, 6), he also emphasized that the structure of Orientalism is not merely a collection of lies, as if to simply uncover the truth would instantly dissolve this structure. Just like Orientalism, modern racial globality is a productive and constitutive material form of power, not just some misstep that stands to be corrected (cf. Van Reekum and Schinkel 2024).

The same critique, in correspondence with Da Silva's analysis of the racial as productive, can be levelled at all-too easy explanations of racism as mere ideological-superstructural strategy of division in the interest of capital accumulation.<sup>8</sup> That this functionalist explanation is not historically accurate, we can learn from Cedric Robinson, who in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* points out that "the development of capitalism can ... be seen as having been determined in form by the social and ideological composition of a civilization that had assumed its fundamental perspectives during feudalism" and that premodern European forms of racialism provide the context of emergence of capitalism rather than a development specific to and only functional for the capitalist mode of production (2021, 24, 28). The nineteenth century triumph of capitalism took place not only because of the *creation* of certain "social divisions and habits of life and attitude," but also because of their *persistence*, that is their persistence from a racial order "that predated capitalist production" (42).

### To Begin

These considerations show how inclusion is a category of brutality. One perhaps more nefarious than outright attacks, this aspiration to the Faustian bargain of gaining access, or at least closer proximity to the subject position of self-determination, and to pursue the never-ending promise of deferred transparency. As Audre Lorde famously said: "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*" (2019, 105; cf. Taylor 2017, 139). When assimilation offers no refuge from annihilation but only a prolongation of the

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<sup>8</sup> While a proper treatment of the topic falls outside the scope of this article, it is interesting to consider the relations between Da Silva's argument and the (post-)Marxist tradition. The most fruitful and positive aspect Da Silva finds in Marxism is the basic acknowledgement of entanglement, the primacy of affectability (labor). However, as she writes, "Marxism's embracing of historicity limits its deployment as a basis for the project of racial emancipation" (Da Silva 2007, 262). Da Silva's commitments seem to be in line with other anti-political tendencies within abolitionist and Black radical thought, exemplified by Harney and Moten in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013). They describe the stifling enclosure of critique and politics that endangers the entangled and fugitive sociality of the undercommons, writing that "it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common" (17). Here, politics is a way of bringing others into the fold of transparency. Instead of succumbing to inclusion in politics, the presupposed necessity of a totalizing emancipatory subjectivity that needs to rule out any other-wise being is refused in favor of ungovernable forms-of-life. The subaltern, then, can maybe not speak (Da Silva 2007, 184), but she can sing, shout, scream, and flee the incarcerating intelligibility of Euro-white speech. Compare this fairly classical account of Chantal Mouffe (2005, 18): "Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. ... Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities." Eschewing the trap of politics and refusing to (re)affirm a liberal discourse of pluralism, Harney and Moten recognize that not only could things be otherwise, *they already are*, all the time. This is fugitivity. Harney and Moten, together with so many others, urge us to revel in our entanglement. Because what is love other than affectability? (For ultra-left/anarchist anti-politics, see for example Invisible Committee 2009; Agamben 2023). (Vulgar) Marxism can be its own form of obliterating engulfment, representing not just an inclusion in politics but even a blatant instantiation of racial analytics. This is most certainly true when it takes recourse to what Alberto Toscano (2023, 2) aptly describes as "the sociologically spectral and suspect figure of the 'forgotten' white working class ... this racialized simulacrum of a proletariat is not a steppingstone towards class politics but rather its obstacle, its malevolent and debilitating ersatz form." For many, then, the combination (or even equation) of the Black radical tradition with Marxism is seen as a theoretical and historical assimilation that is to be rejected. More recently, however, in his polemical book *Red Africa: Reclaiming Revolutionary Black Politics* (2023), Kevin Ochieng Okoth has criticized this view, taking to task the theoretical discourse he dubs Afro-pessimism 2.0, whose most notable exponents are Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, but which for Okoth also involves figures such as Harney and Moten, Saidiya Hartman and Cedric Robinson. He attacks this discourse as an "anti-politics of despair" (28) that encourages "retreat instead of revolt" (25), accusing it of an "erasure of anti-colonial Marxism" (xi) and as "preclud[ing] Black people's participation in radical politics" (34). Interestingly enough, while some of the political implications of her argument seem to coincide with the theoretical strands he derides, Okoth points to Da Silva (2007) as a positive contribution, lauding her emphasis on the global historical context as providing a fruitful impetus for analysis of "the multiplicity of afterlives of both slavery and colonization" while avoiding "parochial ontological conceptions of Blackness" (Okoth 2023, 64). Okoth proposes to embrace historical materialism (16) but does not elaborate as much as one would like on his understanding of it. Noteworthy however, is his productive engagement with different revolutionary anticolonial histories, as well as his relevant emphasis on contingent praxis (14-15), the latter reminiscent of something that is articulated so well in abolition feminism, namely the "ambiguous terrain located in the space between necessary responses to immediate needs and collective and radical demands for structural and ultimately revolutionary change" as "the productive tension of holding onto a radical, real, and deep vision while engaging in the messy daily practice" (Davis et al. 2022, 5, 16).

obliterating logic of the racial, then demands for recognition and rights become clear as only in service to the structure we should seek to eliminate. It is the abolition of the present state of things that we need, not their reconfiguration. In keeping with this insight, appeals to transparency and requests or arguments for inclusion can no longer be maintained, they can only make us wonder, “how could we fail to understand that we have better things to do than follow in that Europe’s footsteps?” (Fanon 2004, 236). The best thing to do, then, is to start. Aimé Césaire (1995, 99) teaches us: “We do have to start. / Start what? / The only thing in the world worth starting: / The End of the world, for Heaven’s sake.”

To begin, as June Jordan (2021, 7) writes: “To begin is no more agony / than opening your hand”

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