

Black Op

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BLACK STUDIES IS A DEHISCENCE AT THE HEART OF THE INSTITUTION AND ON ITS EDGE; ITS BROKEN, CODED DOCUMENTS SANCTION WALKING IN another world while passing through this one, graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth. The cultivated nature of this situated volatility, this emergent poetics of the emergency in which the poor trouble the proper, is our open secret.

This open secret is the aim of black studies—a weight, a comportment, where what it is to carry converges with what it is to arrive, always more and less than completely. The critique of the structures and tendencies whose delimitation and denial of that aim appear integral to their own foundation has rightly been understood to be indispensable to black studies: “the critique of Western Civilization” is black studies, according to Cedric Robinson, which is to say that what is called Western civilization is the object of black studies. This black optics is an auditory affair: night vision given in and through voices that shadow legitimate discourse from below, breaking its ground up into broken air; scenes rendered otherwise by undertones that are overheard, but barely. (Consider the rustle of a garment as the open, internally noncoterminal, interrogatory punctuation of a collective chop or clap; the worked, songlike irregularity animating Andrew Cyrille’s brushed analytic of flavor; the breathy tortuousness of Jeanne Lee’s brightening of taste; the seen, seared, heard, sheared relation between what is there and not there, on the outskirts of all belonging, that the music gives.) Bearing vast repertoires of high-frequency complaints, imperceptible frowns, withering turns, silent sidesteps, and ever-vigilant attempts not to see and hear, black studies’ pleasurable series of immanent upheavals and bad, more than subjunctive moods are the critique of Western civilization. Often this critique shows up in a range of unpaid, imposed pedagogical duties carried out at various faculty meetings and conferences; in all its justifiable, fetishized performativity, it is often manifest as a sublation of anger mistaken for uncut ire or the absence of ire. Black students have to think about the give and take of such surplus being stripped from the thickness

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of their skin, then decide that it is best understood, best distilled, as the mood for love.

This is why Robinson is equally adamant that black studies' critical modalities are driven toward and directed by an aim—the ontological totality and its preservation—that, in all its secret openness, is called blackness. Black studies' aim has always been bound up with and endangered by its object. When the prosecutorial gaze that is trained on that object (Western civilization) passes over that aim (blackness, which is not but nothing other than Western civilization), the danger is brutally, ironically redoubled. Talk of the preservation of the ontological totality produces great consternation in certain circles, which is unsurprising given the scarred, grainy, phonic inscription that accompanies such utterance. When that sound is received as mere catastrophic effect, as an always-already-broken acoustic mirror, critique turns into litigation in the hope of silencing it. But catastrophe must be sounded for the terrible, beautiful resonance it bears of that anoriginal recording of constant incision and expansion whose irreducible priority persists only insofar as preservation is transformation. It is in the recognition of the interplay of rupture and irruption in and as the given that black studies' aim and object intermittently, inconsistently, but serially reconvene, again and again momentarily escaping danger. Black studies break/s a rhythm whose tactile complexity must be maintained while moving in and out of the institution, where smooth abrasion never seems to have a chance. Black studies' inordinate feeling for divisions and collections requires every last bit of texture, as an opening gambit held in reserve—the “parantological distinction” between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black.

In abiding with this distinction, one might instantiate an adequate challenge to the voraciously instrumental antiessentialism, powered in an intense and terrible way by good intentions, that sanctions black stud-

ies' ongoing struggle with the misplacement of its aim *and* object. A kind of carelessness is revealed—as if the truth of old-new things is made available through their neglect—when invocations of home are subject to the continual misrecognition of their perpetual ideation of perpetual motion, while claims on homelessness are held to be everything other than the most radical mode of being-in-the-world. Similarly, when the strained desire the history of thinking imposes on those who have to think their way out of the exclusionary constrictions of that history succumbs to the antierotic power of summary judgment, the work that emerges is undone by what it misses. Behind such pseudocritical nonsolicitousness often lies a conflation of totality and the specter of a still univocality from which an etiolated idea of blackness is derived in order that it might be rescued by appeals to multiplicity that never fully regulate their own dismissive impulses. In fact, to be down with the dialectic of home and homelessness within which blackness persists, a dialectic that n(eg)ation language seems to bring into the sharpest audiovisual relief, one must have indexed (but more than this—grasped and inhabited in order to have thrown and departed) the ensemble of uptown operations that are migration's precedent, held, as they are, in captive movements that still take place and flight up the country. The mysteries of a certain kind of locomotive whine are always given and withheld by way of the underwater cables some alien folk lay down when they are barred from travel and forcibly removed. The submerged span remains as its own convention. So that out of the unjustified margin between the ascription of contagion as slur and the vicious infatuation surveillance imposes, blackness is a general, material aspiration, the condition of possibility of politics understood, along but also off Foucauldian tracks, as the irreducible unconventionality of race war—covert, gentle violence in the midst of conversion, an effect of conversion and imminently

convertible in and as this essence of covering rolled back (flourished, ex-caped) and aggressively forgiving modesty. No government can take responsibility for it, however much it emerges in and out of governmental conditions; at the same time, it remains unresponsive to the governance that it calls and the governments that it rouses. The paraontological distinction brings the secrecy and openness of this gathering into relief as well.

All this—which was always so essentially and authentically clear in its wrought, inventive, righteous obscurity—now often suffers being revealed and reviled in critique that advances by way of what is supposed to be the closure of authenticity, essence, and experience, all of which continue to be made to share the most precise and predictably easy-to-dismiss name, local habitation, and communal form of life. That blackness is often profiled and found wanting what it is and has, in work that involuntarily falls under the admittedly imprecise rubric of African American studies, is also unsurprising and is due not so much to chauvinistic reactions to real or perceived chauvinism but to the fact that blackness's distinction from a specific set of things that are called black remains largely unthought. Paraontological resistance to this particular brand of orthodoxy requires a paleonymic relation to blackness, which is not in need of a highlight it already has or an extrachromatic saturation it already is or a rampant internal differentiation it already bears. As such, it need not be uncoupled from the forms that came to stand (in) for blackness, to which they could not be reduced and which could not be reduced to them.

What is often overlooked in blackness is bound up with what has often been overseen. Certain experiences of being tracked, managed, cornered in seemingly open space are inextricably bound to an aesthetically and politically dangerous supplementarity, an internal exteriority waiting to get out, as if the prodigal's return were to leaving itself.

Black studies' concern with what it is to own one's dispossession, to mine what is held in having been possessed, makes it more possible to embrace the underprivilege of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape. The strain of black studies that strains against this interplay of itinerancy and identity—whether in the interest of putting down roots or disclaiming them—could be said, also, to constitute a departure, though it may well be into a stasis more severe than the one such work imagines (itself to be leaving). In contradistinction to such skepticism, one might plan, like Curtis Mayfield, to stay a believer and therefore to avow what might be called a kind of metacritical optimism. Such optimism, black optimism, is bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the appositional, runaway, phonoptic black operations—expressive of an autopoetic organization in which flight and inhabitation modify each other—that have been thrust upon it. The burden of this paradoxically aleatory goal is our historicity, animating the reality of escape in and the possibility of escape from.

What if the study of comparative racialization begins to extend and deepen its critical and imaginative relation to the terms *abolition* and *reconstruction* in a genuine, fundamental, fantastic, radical collective rethinking of them that will take into account their historical ground while also propelling them with the greatest possible centrifugal force into other, outer, space? Then, even though these terms index a specific history in the United States, their continued relevance and resonance will be international as well as intranational insofar as the ongoing aggressive constitution of the modern nation-state as a carceral entity extends histories of forced migration and stolen labor and insofar as the imperial suppression of movements that would excavate new aesthetic, political, and economic dispositions—as well, of course, as those movements themselves—is a global phenomenon. Abolition and

reconstruction might then be seen as ongoing projects animating the study of comparative racialization as well as black studies, two fields that will be seen as each other's innermost ends, two fields that will be understood as constituted through the claim they make on—their thinking of and in—blackness.

Finally, one might plan to continue to believe that there is such a thing as blackness and that blackness has an essence given in striated, ensemblic, authentic experience (however much a certain natural bend is amplified by the force of every kind of event, however productive such constant inconstancy of shape and form must be of new understandings of essence and experience). It is obvious (particularly after the recent lessons of Lindon Barrett, Herman Bennett, Daphne Brooks, Nahum Chandler, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Brent Edwards, Saidiya Hartman, Sharon Holland, and Achilles Mbembe, among others) that blackness has always emerged as nothing other than the richest possible combination of dispersion and permeability in and as the mass improvisation and protection of the very idea of the human. Thus, concern over the supposedly stultifying force of authenticity exerted by supposedly restrictive and narrow conceptions of blackness, or worry over the supposed intranational dominance of blackness broadly and unrigorously conceived (in ways that presuppose its strict biological limitation within an unlimited minoritarian field), or anxiety over the putatively intradiasporic hegemony of a certain mode of blackness (which presumes national as well as biological determinations that are continually over- and underdetermined) indexes some other trouble, which we would do well to investigate. Such investigation is best accompanied by vigilant remembrance of and commitment to the fact that blackness is present (as E. P. Thompson said of the English working class) at its own making and that all the people who are called black are given in and to that presence, which exceeds them (in

an irrevocable, antenational combination of terror and enjoyment, longing and rejection, that Hartman, in particular, illuminates). Ultimately, the paraontological force that is transmitted in the long chain of life and death performances that are the concern of black studies is horribly misunderstood if it is understood as exclusive. Everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness. That claim is neither the first nor the last anticipatory reorientation but is, rather, an irreducible element of the differentially repeating plane that intersects and animates the comparativist sphere.

In this regard, black studies might best be described as a location habitually lost and found within a moving tendency where one looks back and forth and wonders how utopia came to be submerged in the interstices and on the outskirts of the fierce and urgent now. The temporal paradox of optimism—that it is, on the one hand, a necessarily futural attitude while being, on the other hand, in its proper Leibnizian formulation, an assertion of the necessity, rightness, and timelessness of the always already existing—resonates in the slim gap between analytic immersion and deictic reserve. This bitter earth is the best of all possible worlds, a fact that necessitates the renewed, reconstructed, realization of imaginative intensities that move through the opposition of voluntary secrecy and forced exposure in order to understand how the underground operates out in, and as, the open. What's the relation between the limit and the open? Between blackness and the limit? Between a specific and materially redoubled finitude called blackness and the open? The new critical discourse on the relation between blackness and death has begun to approach these questions. That discourse reveals that optimism doesn't require—indeed, it cannot persist within—the repression of that relation; rather, it always lives (which is to say, escapes) in the faithful, postfatal assertion of a right to refuse, in the prenatal instantiation of a

collective negative tendency to differ, and in the resistance to the regulative powers that resistance, differing, and refusal call into being. The general insistence that we don't mind leaving here is inseparable from the fact that it's all right. Black optimism persists in thinking that we have what we need, that we can get there from here, that there's nothing wrong with us or even, in this regard, with here, even as it also bears an obsession with why it is that difference calls the same, that resistance calls regulative power, into existence, thereby securing the simultaneously vicious and vacant enmity that characterizes here and now, forming and deforming us. However much trouble stays in mind and, therefore, in the light of a certain interest that the ones who are without interests have in making as much trouble as possible, there is cause for optimism as long as there is a need for optimism. Cause and need converge in the bent school or marginal church in which we gather together to be in the name of being otherwise.

NOTE

I dedicate this essay to the memory of Lindon Barrett, a scholar of beautiful, severe, generous brilliance. His influence on me—and our friendship—overcame delay and survived estrangement. His work was driven by love.

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