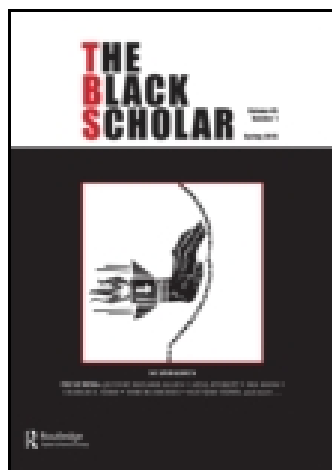


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### Black Studies in Impasse

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# Black Studies in Impasse

DYLAN RODRÍGUEZ

## Introduction: Questions Restated

I embrace the invitation to participate in the conversation reinvigorated by this special issue of *The Black Scholar* in a manner encouraged by its editor, Alex Weheliye: that is, to offer a reflection on the “Boundaries of Black Studies” that emerges from a (that is, my) particular situated relationship to the field, and which therefore interprets the notion of “boundary” from within an extended experience as well as a structural position. As such, I must begin by qualifying the form of this contribution while providing the reader a context through which to read these unfinished, but no less urgent, thoughts. If there is one contribution I wish to make to the critical dialogs enlivened by this collection of essays, it entails an encouragement to interact with the possibilities of communion and insurgency that are fostered—rather than merely inhibited—by black studies’ institutional, political-intellectual, pedagogical, and self-instituted boundaries. Such boundaries, after all, can represent the dynamic and critically studious autonomous movements of black studies praxis in all its forms (intra- and extra-academic), while inviting arrivals to meet and work with, against, and through those very same boundaries. What follows is a short meditation on one such arrival, which I hope can help facilitate a deeper consideration of the creative potentials and critical impasses produced by

another kind of movement that, in my view, seems to be escaping sufficient scrutiny in these academic times: While (as I will argue) black studies is constituted by a spirit of radical generosity that invites a global sense of black liberationist, black feminist, and black queer social-intellectual transformations, what does it mean for its boundaries to often be traversed so fluidly as to trivialize the obligations and accountabilities wrought by a history of intense struggles for coherence, institutional survival, and scholarly legibility/circulation? That is, beyond re-raising questions regarding the sometimes too-easily executed appropriations of black studies by other disciplines, interdisciplinary scholarly fields, and cultural practices (e.g. spoken word, visual art, Hollywood film), what might it mean to conceptualize the boundaries of black studies as a direct articulation of the responsibilities, historical gravities, and critical limitations/possibilities

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of black radicalism? These are not questions that can be answered definitively here, so I proceed within my own insufficiencies.

First, I intend no inference that the relation to black studies articulated in the following pages—nor the interpretation of this relation that I begin to offer—constitutes much more than a synthesis and partial restatement of some of the most durable and consistent strains in black critical thought that have defined its emergence as a rejoinder to the humanism of the modern white world. The only real distinguishing feature of my unfolding thoughts is the peculiar historical circumstance in which they are being (re)stated: at a moment when black (African American, African diaspora, Africana) studies is both utterly institutionalized and vexingly embattled, from within and without, simultaneously thriving in its creative productions while generally struggling to survive the constant hostilities and abrasions of its institutional settings; and in a broader national/global setting, in a period when black knowledge-making and freedom practices are confronting a rearrangement of systemic racist violence in which unprecedented carceral, social, and physiological threats to black life (from the racial epidemiology of HIV/AIDS to the US and global policing-prison regimes) occur in the alleged aftermath of apartheid, Jim Crow segregation, and formal/franchise colonialism.

Second, these pages embrace an incompleteness of thought that resists the impulse to provide decisive analytical problematics, paradigmatic propositions, critical theorizations, activist agendas, or methodological statements. While my general practice has always been to attempt a form of scholarly/

activist writing that achieves precisely such a sense of decisiveness, I find myself unable to perform such a reassuring political-intellectual posture here. If I am to be completely honest, the unfamiliar vulnerability of writing in this way—thinking with and perhaps against you, incompletely—is stalked by a sense of structural and positional insufficiency, as if occupying an impasse that defies available resolution. *I am “in” black studies, but am I really “of” it?* It is toward this impasse—and with encouragement toward the creativity lodged in incompleteness—that I am moved to raise, and here momentarily think through, a few questions regarding the conditions under which black studies has been a vital and life-sustaining practice. Further, this line of questioning suggests the central rather than complementary position of black radical thought in awakening multiple radical engagements with the epistemological, historical-material, and political boundaries that have defined modern nations, economies, and academies.

My hope is that revisiting such questions in this venue will serve as a small reminder of the unfinished work with which black studies compels some form of collective engagement: (1) Is there a characteristic, that is animating, political-intellectual impulse that distinguishes black studies as a liberation practice that is both capable of and willing to nourish people in the structural position through which I am writing to you (non-black, racially marked people whose relation to black life is mediated by this very same non-black racial unmarking)? (2) To the extent that black studies has always been a creative, liberation-focused, and generally radical political-intellectual practice that is

both an insurrection within and movement against/beyond the presumed boundaries of the university, college, and academy, what is the usefulness of recounting this insurgent genealogy now? (3) Finally, what is the urgency of forming some terms of general legibility for anti-black systemic violence—that is, to attempt to build a strategic political literacy—that conveys the massive and global deformation of racism in its post-civil rights, post-Jim Crow, post-apartheid, and post-racial forms?

In attempting to retain some faithfulness to the experimental impulse of this incomplete exercise, and with the encouragement of the editor, I have minimized academic citations, curtailed what might otherwise unfold into lengthy theoretical-methodological meditations, and sacrificed argumentative and expository rigor for the sake of offering a sketch of thoughts that I hope will help facilitate more sustained critical discourses and pedagogies.

## Black Studies as Radical Generosity

While there is no singular way to characterize the significance of black studies to the advancement of global liberationist praxis in its different, contradictory iterations, I think it is possible to at least enliven a deep appreciation of one particular manner in which black studies constitutes the seemingly perpetual war/creativity of black freedom. By extension, it may be productive to remind ourselves of how black liberation struggles, from their nationalist and anticolonialist forms to their guerrilla and radical feminist

embodiments, have often formed an invitation of urgent openness to non-black (and at times, even anti-black) others to engage or participate in the work at hand. This is to say, black studies is nothing if not a gesture of radical generosity, which it makes at the frequent cost of rendering itself vulnerable to appropriation, deformation, and trivialization.

It is impossible to believe, by way of immediate example, that ethnic studies (or for that matter, recent rearticulations of American studies) would be remotely feasible as an institutional, pedagogical, or intellectual apparatus if not for its long-running precedents and accompaniments in black studies, nor would coalition-based student struggles for ethnic studies be politically legible outside the militant mobilizations by black students for spaces of intellectual self-determination in schools, colleges, and universities throughout most of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. It is within this larger historical text, and, more intimately, through twenty-plus years of working as a student, teacher, activist, and scholar both within and in close affinity with black studies, that I continue to experience black studies as invitation and generosity, and it is through this structuring embrace of black studies that I have shaped my own pedagogical, academic, and activist engagements with liberationist praxis.

The particular black studies invitation to create, think, and struggle is nothing less than a modality of revolt, and is at best a catalyst for remaking/unmaking the world at hand. It is in part the profound generosity of this invitation—the move to allow others (including sometime antagonists) to join and

be with the movement of this long-running black creation that both defines and extends the boundaries of black studies for those of us non-black people of color who inhabit a state of differentiation from both the transparency of white racial existence<sup>1</sup> and the lived historical densities of black being. What is at stake in the invitation is thus an acute choice, offered in Frantz Fanon's manner of ripping open the contingent—hence historically fungible—nature of the violent power binaries that structure an oppressive racial-colonial sociality, and in the tradition of Ida B. Wells's praxis of emergency that clarifies the necessary (and arguably, at times, inherent) positionality of black knowledge production against the systemic evisceration and elimination of black people and black worlds within the regulating parameters of civil order and peace.

In this choice, there is really no middle ground: If anti-black violence and anti-black (proto-) genocide are part of the structuring—that is, paradigmatic—logics of modern social formations, black studies is the historical activity through which this condition is demystified, apprehended, and potentially irrupted. It is in the gravity of these accumulated actions that it comes to constitute a working community, moving infrastructure, and extra-academic intellectual practice that has the capacity to consolidate a perpetual opposition to the liberal white (multiculturalist) world's perpetual violence. The choice, then, is to not only abstractly recognize, but to labor from the material and theoretical premises of an ongoing, normalized condition of undeclared civil war that possesses an entire cultural, domestic military/policing, juridical, and civic infrastructure and

thus dynamically positions that infrastructure against the actualities and potentials of black social being and self-determination. This, then, becomes the foundation of black studies as radical creativity, simultaneously an insurgent knowledge and quality of thought that posits the complex—queer, feminist, and always militant—work of black liberation as something to which all meaningful intellectual work must articulate a relation. (Truly, really, everything . . . from organic chemistry to studio art.) What we have been politely calling a “choice,” then, is less of a voluntary decision than it is a condition in which the totality of institutional, cultural, and economic forces compels an urgent response. Black studies answers from this position of historical coercion, and in this we can be clear that its animating urgency—which distinguishes it from perhaps all other academic disciplines/fields and establishes its singularity as a model of insurgent intellectual practice—is what constitutes the generosity of its invitation.

### **Black Studies as Historical Gravity/Force**

Here, black studies may be better understood as a center of gravity—as a force—rather than a spatially conceived scholarly field with or without boundaries. Therein grows a more truthful understanding of what it means for some of us to be working in intimacy with black studies as creativity-and-revolt: The choice of affinity and engagement is not only a departure from hegemonic (disciplinary and interdisciplinary) epistemes, methods, historical narratives,

pedagogies, and canons, it is also a political decision to purpose every bit of research and knowledge-making toward a freedom/survival imperative. This is part of what it means to understand black studies within the context of the Fanonist choice it offers: Its activity is precisely that which holds the potential to revision and remake worlds, rescript subjectivities, affirm collective freedom movement, and, crucially, infiltrate and appropriate the structuring desire of intellectual labor itself. If we can agree that there can be no singular, formulaic intellectual modality for an urgent, historical intellectual movement that works within (and not past) the impasse of liberation and anti-black violence that has always defined the material conditions of black thought, then perhaps we can appreciate another dimension of the black studies force: that in every one of its iterations, black studies is a scholarly liberation praxis defined by the robustness of its internal debates and transformations, offering an on-the-ground example of how the future-oriented audacity of freedom struggle (particularly for people whose collective social futurity, across historical moments, cannot be presumed as such) requires an explosion of the fundamental, preconceptual categories that have formed Western epistemes—academic and otherwise—as the afterbirth of conquest, mass kidnap, and racial chattel.<sup>2</sup> That is, in the process of its always-unfolding praxis, black studies consistently reorients and reconfigures the categories of truth, being, humanness, beauty, love, community, and sociality.

I am arguing, I suppose, that the fullest engagement with black studies is a choice to position oneself in a permanent, radical,

creative confrontation with the world-at-large, and to enter a guerrilla intellectual relation to the perpetual civil war of anti-black violence. Keep in mind that liberationist guerrilla war requires multiple registers of engagement, including aboveground forms of knowledge-making and cultural production that empower, popularly legitimate, or even catalyze other kinds of freedom insurgency.

Given the gravity of this choice—the choice to accept the radical/guerrilla invitation of black studies—there are added layers of significance to the generalized, insistent sense of generosity among black studies scholars and within the textual life of black studies scholarship itself. That is, the always immediate life-and-death stakes on which black studies has uniquely turned—in ways usually illegible to the hegemonic disciplines while absolutely instructive to the various insurgent interdisciplines/counter-disciplines (including and especially ethnic studies)—not only define its methods and concerns in fundamental ways, but they also constitute its streams of knowledge production within the inescapable shadows of holocaust. What does it mean to share in the work of creating narrative, archive, pedagogy, and radical truth in direct relation to such a knowledge-condition?

### **Black Studies as Radical Urgency and (Im)Patience**

Perhaps a principal boundary of black studies is defined by the urgency imperative<sup>3</sup> that sits on the other side of generosity. If a central component of black studies has be-

come its standing rebuttal to the pluralist liberalisms of hegemonic multiculturalism—if it explodes the idea, for example, that the American nation-building project can ever be disentangled from its structuring imperatives in racial and anti-black genocide and the accompanying logics of evisceration—then the pull of its generosity is also a form of mobilized challenge to heteropatriarchal (as well as homonormative) white life and all its (“diverse,” phenotypic non-white) derivatives.

It is precisely because the white life of the modern world simultaneously relies on, reproduces, and consistently signifies the death, non-life, and non-historicity of black people that black studies provides an intellectual militancy that moves in multiple directions. It suggests, by virtue of its actually existing activities, that the afterlives of anti-black genocide<sup>4</sup> do not equate to an extinction or even effective subjection of black thought (to the contrary, these afterlives catalyze such creativity). If anything, it provides an indispensable form of critical, collective movement within/toward the freedom dreams of black liberation,<sup>5</sup> on which all other liberations are dependent. Such a political-intellectual influence has surfaced in recent prison strikes led by imprisoned black and brown men in Georgia (2010) and California (2011 and 2013), in which some of the most vulnerable people among the captive population (including those held in solitary confinement and security housing units) have placed their lives in the balance for the sake of challenging the state’s normalized conditions of physiological torture and proto-genocidal institutional routines (sensory deprivation, long-term solitary iso-

lation, poor nutrition, medical neglect, overcrowding, etc.). What has been profoundly incisive about these carceral rebellions is the manner in which their demands, public statements, and political discourse reflect an on-the-ground analysis of the prison regime as a direct institutional elaboration of US slavery’s racial chattel logic. In this critical moment, prison strikes in Georgia and California amount to a confrontation with institutionalized dehumanization, in which the black radical tradition’s historical modality of conceptualizing freedom struggle as an ongoing form of slave revolt is a structural and discursive foundation. Here, the survival imperative and freedom dreams of imprisoned people are significantly configured—and made possible—by the precedents of black liberation movement. I am suggesting, by way of this example, that the principal boundary of black studies is not one easily defined by inclusion or exclusion, but rather by a political-intellectual proximity to the disruptive/transformational productivity of black studies as a deeply cultural endeavor that disputes and effectively destroys the thesis of the disinterested scholarly subject who stands before the modern Western academic-epistemic regime.

### **Black Studies as Condition of Being/Creation**

To put it another way, black studies as a cultural labor intends to both affect and effect a way of being—or striving to be—in the world, such that the classroom, text, and discursive structure of black studies is a permanent point of departure and sometime or-



igin, rather than a site of destination, professional or otherwise. When this cultural labor is engaged most profoundly, it would be entirely accurate to assert that one never really graduates with a degree in black studies—as if it was a scholastic accomplishment with some finality or academic closure—but that one is instead pushed running into the world with an investment of historical obligations and lifework that require a constant return to black studies' most radical iterations of an always-unfolding, constantly extending, creating. A creating, as well, that is always undertaken by way of the urgency imperative that effectively functions as the beating heart behind its force. It seems clear that this kind of "graduation"—in which scholarly literacy is not so much grounds for asserting academic mastery, but rather serves as a medium through which to claim a guerilla intellectual autonomy—is exactly what spurs so many of those who have led, challenged, and transformed black studies over the course of its complex existence, within and across its diasporic, feminist, Marxist, nationalist, anti-colonialist, surrealist, queer, and abolitionist articulations.

Perhaps another way to understand black studies' animating embrace is to converse with it as a critically acute (im)patience: that black studies is constantly attempting to render intelligible, pedagogical, and communicable the black truth of a historical condition that is in some ways both unfathomable and irretrievable, and that this work cannot wait another minute, because as much as the black past poses an archival/theoretical challenge, the integrity and material possibility of a black future can never be assumed. This is why, for example, the racial technol-

ogy of criminalization-qua-incarceration is as much a coercive script about non-futurity as about the immediacies of racist state violence; the anti-black foundations of modern policing and imprisonment are an attempt to institutionalize a logic of non-historicity for the profiled and captured.<sup>6</sup>

The characterizing patience/impatience of black studies generates a necessary tension, one that emerges from the peculiar way its cultural work inhabits the impasse between epistemology and dehumanization, ontology and nonexistence/dysselection,<sup>7</sup> political-intellectual intervention and the terror of physiological vulnerability to racial violence. As the long genealogy of radical black intellectuals so clearly reflects, it is often the case that critical social intervention and immediate personal vulnerability are effectively coproducing and coterminous. It is here that the condition of black studies' generosity becomes clearer: It in part emerges through an involuntary sense of historical (that is, simultaneously physiologically and intellectually coerced) urgency that drives its forceful openness to participation/engagement. This involuntariness is precisely what Fanon so productively narrates in his illumination of the anti-colonial "choice." It is a choice to be made under conditions that are not only not of one's own choosing, but which already dictate the choice that must be made.

In fact, this urgency, openness, (im)patience, and generosity are what melt the assumptive differentiation between the realms of the physiological and the intellectual; against the still-hegemonic fabrication of disembodied, disinterested academic thought, there is the black studies position

of worldly, physical-intellectual interaction with an oppressive absolute. There simply cannot be any clean distinction between the conditions of anti-black violence that contextualize black knowledge production and the content, circulation, accessibility, and pragmatic mobilization of black studies as a specific form of black radicalism. Black studies is a simultaneity of creation and reaction, transformative possibility and immediate survival, liberation vision and here-and-now critical knowledge—it is in this simultaneity that black studies becomes precisely that which can assemble us and terrify them. This is where the forcefulness of invitation meets the pavement of worldly obligation and commitment (ultimately, burden).

### **Black Studies as Radical Inhabitation**

I hope by now it is clear that I am not suggesting that the boundaries of black studies—however we understand them—are simply permeable and dynamic, or that they are absolutely open to interpretation and intervention by any who wish to momentarily engage its field of concerns and ensembles of knowledge production, disciplinary or otherwise. Rather, I am trying to reflect my own situated understanding of what it means to encounter black studies as radical generosity, and how its gesture of invitation fosters an intimacy with violence that potentially disrupts the position of spectator/witness that has long been woven into the tapestry of anti-black racism and its genocidal logics.<sup>8</sup> That is, black studies explodes the “ethnographic object”<sup>9</sup> of black social subordina-

tion, suffering, and subjection by producing knowledge that is in a permanent entanglement with the experience of that violence, embracing rather than disavowing the ways in which that violence is at the epistemological center of critical black thought itself.

Thus, to be meaningfully engaged in/with the project of black studies is to abandon—in principle and performance—the position of intellectual spectator to such violence and to struggle with whether and how that violence is both the condition and productive, dynamic center of a scholarly liberationist praxis, including its scholarly iterations. The singular ingenuity of black studies is the manner in which it creates a capacity to galvanize creativity and historicity within actually existing circumstances of profound oppression. From W. E. B. DuBois’s *Black Reconstruction in America*<sup>10</sup> (written during the early-twentieth century renaissance of state-condoned anti-black lynching) to Angela Y. Davis’s “Political Prisoners, Prisons and Black Liberation”<sup>11</sup> (penned in the context of Davis’s political incarceration in Marin County Jail), black studies texts not only speak to, but from within, multiple historical logics and regimes of domination, and—at their very least—demystify the origins and purposes of knowledge production in direct relation to the systemic fragility of black life.

Thus, while the intellectual trajectories, structuring rhetorics, methods, institutional organizing strategies, and pragmatic objectives of black studies are as robust, contradictory, and dynamic as black historical experience itself, black studies cannot be reduced to a formal academic practice that occurs in the context of departments, programs, and

ad hoc initiatives. It is always worth recalling that the work of black studies has long been principally inhabited in extra-state and underground learning communities in and beyond the slave plantation and prison, anti-racist and revolutionary movements, and communities of organic black intellectuals and artists. As a labor of knowledge that is indelibly inscribed with the urgency imperatives of liberation, the characterizing generosity of its invitation is simultaneously principled and historically coerced (that is, its invitation is in part borne of uninvited external force). In this particular way, black studies' generosity entails more than a grasping for (non-black) others' coalescence or even solidarity with the worldly critical labors in which black studies is involved. The invitation is not a pragmatic, piecemeal, or inherently pleasant one; rather, it is formed in a generosity whose animating impulse is, at times, a plainly stated call to arms—an urging that violates the late-neoliberal impulses of multiculturalism and its derivatives by reminding that radical black thought emerges from the material conditions of black people, and thus permanently confronts the anti-black violence that has shaped every significant legacy of new world modernity.

## **Black Studies in (Genocidal) Impasse**

Given the force and context of its invitation, what might it mean to engage black studies in the impasse of anti-black genocide? The work of indigenous studies scholar Patrick Wolfe provides a useful critical point of

departure for considering the importance of black studies within this global-historical context. Wolfe's concern, in naming what he calls settler colonialism's "logic of elimination,"<sup>12</sup> is in articulating the particular conditions of duress enmeshing indigenous social formations, as well as to indicate their surrounding antisocial formations. The logic of elimination, for Wolfe, reflects the absolute perpetuity of a historical process in which the indigenous being is subjected to physical, discursive, biological, and legal technologies of mitigation and erasure. As such, the logic of indigenous elimination is and remains central to the construction and reproduction of modern state and juridical orders, as well as their constituting cultural orders: The American Indian—that is, the figure of the American Indian, the remnants of indigenous being and life modalities, the persistent and haunting presences of indigenous people within and beneath the modern cultural-political order—must always be subjected to elimination, even and especially in the aftermath of their massive physical liquidation.

Wolfe's idea is instructive in a number of ways. Specifically, the notion of a logic of elimination both enables and encourages a theory of racial-colonial genocide that centers on a relational conception of world-changing violence, rather than replicating the dominant scholarly and juridical fixation on static academic definition and the jurisprudential application of the flawed UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Wolfe's logic of elimination, in other words, de-prioritizes the work of seeking formal juridical and international recognition of this-

or-that violence as an “official” genocide, and instead pushes toward a more dynamic conception of how the social logics and ongoing violence of racial and racial-colonial genocides are actually inhabited.

Yet, Wolfe himself conceptualizes genocide as a narrowly institutional-structural arrangement and thus not as a historical logic: For him, “structural genocide” entails a relatively discrete set of institutional forms that emerge for the purposes of forcibly assimilating, displacing, or physically exterminating a population. Notably, his concern in maintaining such a narrow conception of genocide is to privilege the possibility of seeking recognition and redress under the prevailing United Nations genocide jurisprudence. From here, Wolfe offers a useful schematic for understanding how “settler colonialism is an indicator” of genocidal possibility.<sup>13</sup> It is in Wolfe’s offhand inventory of what does and does not merit description as genocide in different settler colonial contexts that he makes a somewhat troubling assertion. Indexing South African apartheid and US chattel slavery as his key examples, Wolfe contends (following genocide studies scholar Colin Tatz) that such racist regimes are not genocidal because “African labor was indispensable to apartheid in South Africa, so it would have been counterproductive to destroy it. The same can be said of African American slavery. In both cases, the genocide tribunal is the wrong court” (emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> Leaving, aside for the moment, whether prosecutorial feasibility should be the primary definitional or ethical standard for deployment of the concept of genocide, I nonetheless wish to posit a gentle rejoinder

to Wolfe on this matter, and gesture toward the black studies tradition as a conceptual and theoretical corrective.

While Wolfe is correct that the raw economic rationality of slavery generally mitigated against the mass extermination of human chattel, he misses the genocidal dimensions of the slavery regime that made it entirely productive for the slave and apartheid societies to constantly eviscerate the captive African populations, both within and in excess of those social formations’ economic operation through racial labor expropriation. While physical destruction and the snuffing of biological life—such as that massively induced by the middle passage and in the triangulated chattel trade—may be the signature indications of genocide, a narrow reliance on those forms of genocidal violence mis-narrates the presence, persistence, and socially productive function of racial terror, humiliation, and barbarity during and beyond the periods of slavery and apartheid. In a particularly revealing historical mis-estimation, Wolfe writes of the US example that “it is highly significant that the barbarities of lynching and the Jim Crow reign of racial terror should be a *posteman-cipation phenomenon*,” (emphasis added),<sup>15</sup> as if lynching and racial terror were not entirely central to the everyday operation of the slave society (!). A further, unfortunate implication of Wolfe’s periodization is the notion that such “barbarities and terror” may well have been mitigated rather than invented, reproduced, and acutely sustained during slavery and apartheid, due to their economies’ dependence on the physical capacities of African labor.

As with other racial genocides, there is a specificity to anti-black genocide that requires its own elaborative schema: While the slave and apartheid economic systems certainly depended on the captive African's labor, those systems also produced the enslaved/captive African in a regime of terror and physiological violence, constantly bringing the African into close proximity with the possibility of death—of oneself, loved ones, and other black people—as part of a broader logic of evisceration that is/was entirely genocidal in its mobilizations and effects (e.g., mass-based civil and social death, interruption of familial relations, categorical subjection to physiological degradation, destruction of religious and spiritual institutions, infanticide, state-sanctioned sexual violence and forced reproduction, etc.). I should clarify that I am not arguing that the genocidal logic of evisceration is exclusive to the genealogy of anti-black genocide—in fact, I would contend that evisceration is entirely central to the forms of cultural, economic, and ecological genocide continually structured by settler states on aboriginal and indigenous peoples in the aftermath of militarized land conquest. Rather, I am contending that there is a peculiarity to the anti-black logic of evisceration that may well require a critical revisiting of how “genocide” is itself conceptualized.

Racial genocide—especially when conceptualized through a centering of the nonfatal and profatal eviscerations of anti-black genocide regimes—is not only a structural-institutional arrangement, but is itself a logic that forms a material historicity. This is why the regimes of racially

genocidal violence never really go away, but instead seem to lurk within our historical present tense—often in ways that make it clear that the constitutive logic of such regimes remains quite intact. I am echoing a conception of “genocide” in this instance that moves within a genealogy of black radicalism and both appropriates and substantially rearticulates hegemonic juridical and academic genocide discourses.<sup>16</sup> Within this understanding of anti-black genocide, as João Costa Vargas has argued, there is a historical continuum in which the signature epochal forms of genocidal violence (e.g., chattel slavery, apartheid, targeted policing/incarceration) produce distended social legacies in which the logics of genocide surface through everyday institutional and cultural forms, from popular media and public policy to criminal law and dominant scholastic pedagogies.

Black studies, as a continuous moment of black articulation, constantly invokes an activated notion of the inheritance and inhabitation of this genocide continuum. Rather than attempting to intellectually transcend or otherwise flee the violence that constitutes the conditions of black thought, black studies actively occupies (that is, actively and insurgently inhabits) the impasse of anti-black genocide and works within it. Black studies lodges its creative, radical, and potentially world-transforming projects from within the material and historical condition of evisceration, and it is in this maneuvering that it marks its concerns with everything else that is—or could be—in the world. We might say that it is precisely in this act of inhabitation that black studies reinvents a po-

sition of impasse through which critical and radical creativities might emerge.

## Endnotes

1. Denise F. Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

2. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *C.R.: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2004): 257–337. Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Alexander G. Weheliye, *Ha-beas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming). Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). David T. Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).

3. I am making direct reference here to João Costa Vargas's consistent articulation of the black genocide urgency imperative throughout much of his scholarly work, most particularly in his book *Never Meant to Survive*. See João H. C. Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

4. See Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive*. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the

Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 103, 28, no. 2 (2010): 31–56.

5. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

6. See Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007). Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

7. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."

8. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

9. Here I am repurposing Audra Simpson's incisive engagement with the ethnographic enterprise in relation to the work of Indigenous intellectuals within/against the disciplinary traditions of anthropology. See Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship," *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9 (December 2007): 67–80.

10. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

11. Angela Y. Davis, "Political Prisoners, Prisons and Black Liberation," in Davis et al., *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (New York: Third Press, 1971), pp. 19–36.

12. See Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Genocide: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies* 1 (2010): 132–158. Patrick Wolfe, "Structure and Event: Settler Colonialism, Time and the Question of Genocide," *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (2008): 102–132.

13. Wolfe develops this thesis in "Structure and Event," pp. 121–122.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

16. See, for example Vargas. *Never Meant to Survive*; Davis, *If They Come in the Morn-*

ing; Civil Rights Congress, *We Charge Genocide* (New York, 1951); George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990). Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport,

CT: L. Hill, 1987). Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

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