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The Transmission of Slavery

Sergio Benvenuto has drawn our attention to “race” as a signifier that is inherently meaningless. This signifier—let us call it *R*—produces racial signification but only when and where it is articulated into a symbolic chain, into a series of oppositions with other signifiers. At the symbolic level of signifiers (as opposed to the imaginary level of meaning), these differences are arbitrary. That *R*, wherever we encounter it in everyday life, is only ever found already articulated into some discursive formation only redoubles the obscure “stupidity” of its status as a signifier. Whatever sense race obtains in this regard is created through the dissolution of the signifier ($R \rightarrow \text{race}$).

Now, what Denise Ferreira da Silva has called the globalization of the “idea of race”[1] has created an historical situation in which *R* has come to signify something or another in all cultures. For all that, it also never has the same meaning in any two instances, its significance contingent on the historical, geographical, linguistic, and personal contexts in which it does its work (i.e., in which *R* is articulated). We might say that if *R* didn’t exist, we would have to invent it: it is a theoretical fiction that accounts for this, the universal particularity of race; the signifier is a back-formation, a derivation from the fact of the general difference of its articulations into the heterogenous fabric of racial meaning. As a concept, *R* is the *sui generis* result of a specifically psychoanalytic method, the *reduction of meaning* (of a knowledge formation, of a symptom, of an ideology, and so on) to its cause in a signifier that resides within it as an absence: both lacking as such (i.e., there is no *R* that is *not* articulated) and ab-sense (i.e., lack-of-sense).

When *R* colors the symbolic opposition between friend and enemy, it racializes the notion of the political in the sense that Carl Schmitt gives it; when it is articulated in a symbolic opposition between life and death, it becomes a dense node of biopower in the sense that Michel Foucault gives it; when it is calculated into a symbolic opposition between the racial and nonracial, it creates a racial formation in the sense that Michael Omi and Howard Winant give it. When Benvenuto speaks of the *power of the signifier*, however, we are operating on another level: the *arbitrary power* of a purely symbolic difference structures the *nonarbitrary power* of the discourses of sovereignty. Racial power in the conventional sense, and in the myriad historical forms it takes, is constituted on *and* against the obscure power of the signifier.

It is at this point that I want to push this line of inquiry in a different direction, namely by historicizing the signifier “race.” After all, this thing did not always exist and did not exactly come out of nowhere. As briefly as possible, I will try to locate its function in an historical rearticulation of Enlightenment politics. A speculative reconstruction can show us that the “job” that this signifier performs, and which it can only perform by resisting signification, is to inscribe a certain political impasse in the modern symbolic field. That inscription enables the antagonism that *R* realizes to be historically transmitted, including to the present. Following a long line of work in this area, I will call this political antagonism *slavery* and its afterlife. What follows are some preliminary notes on the historicity of *R*.

How do we even begin to historicize a signifier? To sketch out a method, we should make a provisional distinction between signifiers *in* the Other—that treasury of symbols that inhere in a given cultural context, are triangulated into certain well-worn constellations of meaning, and are inherited by the subject upon their alienation—and a signifier *beyond* the Other, the appearance or invention of which shocks the received order of meaning. Its impertinence lies in the new signifier’s incompatibility with the Other: it does not immediately “make sense” in received forms of knowledge, even if—perhaps inevitably—it is eventually assimilated into the episteme it disrupts, profoundly reshaping it along the lines of its own making. The moment of invention—a hypothetical moment, and so a presupposition that we must posit—triggers a transvaluation of values, not just in the order of discourse (i.e., the Other) but in the subject that is the effect of that discourse. Of course, this invention is not a precisely dateable event: it is only ascertainable in its effects.[2] The signifier always already appears “at home” in the Other in the aftermath of the revaluation of values it institutes.

On several occasions, Jacques Lacan mused about historical transformations that might qualify as having turned on the invention of a new signifier, which does not so much involve the creation of a novel word (in contrast perhaps to Freud’s invention, which he gave the new name of “psycho-analysis”), but results from a change in the way that an already-existing signifier was used, particularly one that already carried a lot of symbolic weight in a given cultural situation. Under the right conditions, its rearticulation can have wide-ranging effects on the entire semantic network anchored by the signifier. Lacan hints at the phenomenological flavor of such an event through the example of the “invention” of a new religion:

Meanings shift, common sentiments and socially conditioned relations change, but there are also all sorts of so-called revelatory phenomena that can appear in a sufficiently disturbing mode for the terms we use in the psychoses not to be entirely inappropriate for them. The appearance of a new structure in the relations between basic signifiers and the creation of a new term in the order of the signifier are devastating in character.[3]

Its initial effect is one of being devastating to the point of appearing psychotic—but what causes this transformation in and through the signifier? Is it an historical contingency or the symptom of another necessity?

Somewhere in the maelstrom of the 16th or 17th centuries (or was it earlier or perhaps later?)—as a transatlantic traffic of cargo, both nonhuman and inhuman, was grafting the Old World to the New—*slavery* began to be used in a new way. This was no discrete event, but hindsight affords the distance to measure its effects. Where it previously signified a common state of nature, a reprieve from death after capture in war, an alternative to labor in the discharge debt, and so on, a modern rearticulation of *slavery* triggered an epochal reconfiguration—the same signifier now referred to an abyssal deconstruction between person and thing that was “sexually” or “naturally” transferred from mother to child, forever. Radically reused, slavery now referred to a type of being apart from man that could not be reassimilated to the community of the free through an act of conversion (as in religious discourses of slavery), the discharge of debt (as in labor discourses of slavery), or manumission (as in premodern discourses of slavery). As a commodity, the slave could only be used, exchanged, and accumulated—never redeemed. This reuse of slavery was a “revelatory” phenomenon, a cataclysm in civilization, but the quasi-psychotic wound it rent was gradually sutured through the emergence of a second signifier, which gradually codified this new notion of slavery to the Other that it disturbed. It is here that *R*—first and foremost under the name of blackness, or African-ness—emerged as a symptom of the global transformation in the theoretical practice of slavery. How can we characterize the relationship between these two signifiers, *R* and slavery?

In addition to the new *use* of an existing signifier, which changes common sentiments and institutes a new structure of relations between basic signifiers, we must also account for another, accompanying type of invention: that of a *new* signifier that emerges to realize and sustain the effect of the first, that symbolizes the

rupture that follows the resymbolization of slavery. Ed Pluth describes the work that this second type of signifier does—and which does not come from the Other but is issued “in the real.” Unlike the shift described in the reuse of a signifier, this second type of invention “*does not directly produce new significations but [...] mark[s] the presence, within language, of an essential impasse in and resistance to signification.*”[4] What is this essential impasse that *R* (or blackness) inscribes into language without signifying?

In the broadest terms, *R* concretizes nothing but the *abstraction of slavery from itself*—separating, on the one hand, a *political* slavery that the spirit of the political Enlightenment and its bourgeois usurpers loudly repudiated (and passionately attacked) as a violation of human liberty and, on the other hand, a *racial* slavery that was sublimated into the concrete practice and crowning achievement of freedom. *R* thus articulates one form of slavery—feudal or monarchical states’ infringement of natural man’s universal right to life, liberty, and property—to another—the enjoyment of black commodities pedestalized as the *summum bonum* that these rights were supposed to guarantee. Paradoxically, political slavery is understood as only afflicting the free, while racial slavery named the natural state of blackness—and thus not a form of slavery at all. In this conjunction, *R* functions to both rend and restitch a tear in the texture of meaning, suturing the transformation of slavery into a new common sense: in politicizing one form of slavery as an affront to human subjectivity, *R* depoliticizes blackness as a species of private property. As a signifier, *R* does not represent slavery, does not give it meaning or justify its practice: it inscribes the suspension of this dialectic—not between freedom and slavery, but again, *within the theoretical practice of slavery*—by effecting the arbitrary difference between its political and racial forms.[5]

What does the global abolition of chattel slavery at the end of the 19th century do if not decouple this co-constitutive link between *R* and slavery—vanquishing the latter (typically in name only) to preserve and multiply the former across a thousand points of signification? Rather than marking a break from slavery, emancipation led to the purification of the signifier, breaking its reference to the epistemic break that originally needed it and to the political significations that radical abolitionists had given it. This process has ended up “naturalizing the major incident of slavery—the burden of race.”[6] It is in this way that *R*, today, *incarnates the difference within slavery after slavery*, transmitting the signifier as a mute sign that demands, or otherwise becomes available for, articulation into a whole new range of modern epistemologies and ideological formations (as a biological datum, cultural fact, historical tradition, imaginary identification, and so on). This naturalization of *R* represses its historical provenance, dissimulating it as anything other than the originary instantiation of an arbitrary difference within the political.

The political drive that forced the advent of abolition attests to the way that a battle around this signifier *R* functions as a lever of political change, in the United States and beyond. If the dissolution of slavery was impossible without the forms of resistance from below that increasingly made it impossible to ignore the arbitrary nature of the exclusion of blackness from the community of the free, we can understand the result of the political drive of black freedom struggle as tantamount to a *reduction* of the knowledge formations of race to the signifier that subtends them. By putting this cornerstone of psychoanalytic method—reduction—into practice, black political struggle isolates and reveals the caprice of the division between political and racial slavery. We have just said “reveals”—but this is a very inexact way of putting it, if what is “revealed” or “uncovered” here is the fact that *there is nothing behind R but its own gratuitous instantiation*. Perhaps *exposing* is a better way to put it, which suggests that something is simply left out in the open, where it already is. The exposing of this “nothingness” behind *R*, of the negation that is both embodied and disavowed by the signifier, points to the fact that “race” has no signified, which disturbs the fetishistic compatibility that racial power—biopolitical and otherwise—solders between the self-apparentness of race and the political struggle over its meaning. The de-articulation of *R* proves the ethical groundlessness of black subordination, exposing it as the exercise of force in its purest and most arbitrary form.

One of the great insights afforded by black study is this one: that blackness, as a name for the power of this signifier, is the form of the appearance the very seam of the political, the place of its simultaneous

production and subsumption. It is this field that meditates on the experience of black subordination as a site for investigating the ultimately arbitrary constitution of politics at its structural origin. If the repetition of the signifier of race transmits the antagonism of slavery beyond its historical origin, the warp and woof of contemporary politics is also defined by the repetition of this impasse. Is it any surprise that “race,” “racism,” and “antiblackness” have become, in the last year especially, one of the most salient signifiers of political conflict in post-slavery cultures—which is to say, in contemporary culture as such?

Should psychoanalysis seek a more serious investigation into the power of this signifier and the historical conjuncture that it produces, it would do well to consider the emergent field of [afropessimism](#), which may be understood as one of the intellectual arms of the Movement for Black Lives. We know this because afropessimism’s invention of a signifier of its own, *antiblackness*, has spread alongside the emergence of today’s Civil Rights Movements. Careful observers of recent events will have found “antiblackness” plastered on protest signs, circulated in political commentary, argued about in high school debate competitions, discussed in academic theory, and even assimilated into corporate sloganeering, often in adulterated forms such as “anti-Black racism” or “prejudice.” Rather than a specific form of racism, however, antiblackness indexes the very condition for articulating racism and politics.

What does afropessimism indicate about the power of the signifier? We can focus on an aspect of its critique that is most pertinent for our discussion, namely, in the way that afropessimism theorizes antiblack violence as *gratuitous*. What makes it gratuitous is how antiblack violence does not so much punish a subject for its (real or imagined) transgressions of the law, or at least this is not its essential aspect, but that antiblack violence is a routine, arbitrary, and systematic repetition of an act that inscribes the possibility of the symbolic law in its relation to the politics of race. We could think of each corpse that antiblack violence produces (over and over again) as the site of a collapse between the body and its signification, creating a self-referential and meaningless sign, each of which can be thought of as a creation of *R* in its fleshly nonsensicalness. Antiblackness, contends afropessimism, has no cause and no aim other than its own repetition; it is not political but the act of its constitution.

And how do the contemporary Civil Rights Movements in the United States index the power of *R*? Here we should consider the practice of naming those killed—George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but [many more besides](#)—as a form of *arbitrary counter-power*. The murder of each black person becomes an occasion for activists to draw attention to a systematic form of racial oppression, especially the historical formation of policing and the ideological conditions of its reproduction. The tactic of responding to each murder with an injunction to recite their *proper names* (“say his name,” “say her name,” “say their name”) brings the contradiction between each black subject in their irreducible singularity and the apparatus of antiblackness in its structural impersonality into sharp relief. Politicizing naming, in accentuating this contradiction, interrupts the anonymity of antiblackness through a contrast that makes it appear as it is. Rendering each death (now: each name) nonequivalent to the next, and thus refusing the fungibility of the black body, serves to create a negative image of the site of the *production* of politics: the rendering of the black [corpse](#), as both a spectacle of violence and the unmastering of the body.

The proper name is a “rigid designator,” a special type of signifier.[7] It does not refer to any uniquely identifying properties and is not reducible to a cluster of descriptions. Contrary to common wisdom, proper names do not convey the unique characteristics of an individual but fix a reference for a singular subject without predicates—it only refers to *that* one or *this* one, *him*, *her*, or *them*. Naming the dead, then, does not (or does not only) give *meaning* to the human toll of antiblack violence, whether biographical or otherwise, it does not just serve to commit that toll to memory in the service of political mobilization, but it points to blackness as a state in which a subject can only be assumed—in the singularity of her desire and in the universality of her experience—after the fact, in death. This state of dereliction is what afropessimism calls social death.[8]

Instead of giving antiblackness meaning, the practice of naming the dead reverses the dissimulating articulation of *R*: exhuming it from its overburdened signification, leaving the corpse unburied, exposed. It would not be improper to speak of this practice in light of Antigone’s claim to her brother, if only to show

how this political technique of the Black Lives Matter movement inverts the Sophoclean message—if the Greek heroine’s desire to bury Polynices’ corpse draws its obstinacy from a wish to *save* him from an unceremoniousness reserved only for the *ancient* slave, the contemporary practice of giving each corpse a name refuses the state’s Antigonean drive to ritualize black death, thus insisting on the *equivalency* between blackness and the *racial* slave. The serial naming of the dead clocks the meaninglessness and serial repetition of the signifier. It desublimates each black death as the site of its production and reproduction, each one the simultaneous absence and presence of the political.

Notes:

[1] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

[2] Historicizing a signifier is therefore something other than an exercise in etymology or philology (i.e., an inquiry into the construction, meaning, and historical development of words).

[3] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, translated by Russell Grigg, W.W. Norton & Co., 1993, p. 201.

[4] Ed Pluth, *Signifiers and Acts: Freedom in Lacan’s Theory of the Subject*, SUNY Press, 2007, p. 106.

[5] On the development of slavery as a figure of political oppression and as an object in an anti-tyrannical tradition of political philosophy, see: Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

[6] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 192.

[7] Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Harvard University Press, 1972.

[8] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Harvard University Press, 1982.

Bio:

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