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## Shifting Blackness: How the Arts Revolutionize Black Identity in the Postmodern West

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Shifting Blackness:  
How the Arts Revolutionize Black Identity in the Postmodern West

by

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Abstract

The contemporary experiences of racially marginalized people in the West are affected deeply by the hegemonic capitalist Orthodox cultural codes, or episteme, in which blackness operates as the symbol of Chaos. As it relates to people of African descent, these affects are marked by a denial of the black person's full status as an unproblematic subject, by ontological voids arising from the practice of enslavement over the past centuries, and by problems of representation within the West, where examples and points of reference for black identity are always tied up with conflicting interests.

Utilizing Sylvia Wynter's model of the "ceremony" as one means of describing the ways in which blacks in the West maneuver the extant psychological and philosophical perils of race in the Western world, I argue that the history of black responses to the West's ontological violence is alive and well, particularly in art forms like spoken word, where the power to define/name oneself is of paramount importance. Focusing on how art shaped black responses to ontologically debilitating circumstances, I argue that there has always existed a model for liberation within African American culture and tradition.

This work takes an approach that is philosophical and theoretical in nature in order to address the wide breadth of the black experience that lies beyond the realm of

statistics. The goal of this approach is to continue the work of unraveling hidden or under-discussed aspects of the black experience in order to more clearly find possibilities for addressing problems in the construction of race and marginalized people within the Western episteme. This work attempts to redefine the struggle for a healthier ontology within the framework of a process of liberation that transcends Orthodox limitations on the marginalized subject.

## Chapter I: The Postmodern Racial Episteme

[The discourse that marginalized black studies] operated to serve the same extra-cognitive function of Ptolemaic astronomy in the Middle Ages. It re-enacted the celestial/terrestrial physico-ontological principle of Difference in new terms: this time in terms of a bio-ontological principle of Sameness/Difference, expressed, not in the Spirit/Flesh order of value of the Christian medieval order, but in the rational/irrational mode of Order/Chaos of our own (“Ceremony” 42).

Whatever the group—women, natives, niggers—whatever the category—the Orient, Africa, the tropics—the ordering principle of the discourse was the same: the figuration of an ontological order of value between the groups who were markers of “rationality” and those who were the markers of its Lack-State (“Ceremony” 42).

Thus, the system is better seen as a kind of virus (not Arrighi's figure), and its development is something like an epidemic (better still, a rash of epidemics, an epidemic of epidemics). The system has its own logic, which powerfully undermines and destroys the logic of more traditional or precapitalist societies and economies. Deleuze and Guattari call this an axiomatic, as opposed to the

older precapitalist, tribal, or imperial codes. But epidemics also play themselves out, like a fire for want of oxygen; and they also leap to new and more propitious settings, in which the preconditions are favorable to renewed development (Jameson “Culture and Finance Capital” 249).

The world we know is changing. At this strange hour, when the primacy of the United States is as tenuous as ever, we are presided over by a self-proclaimed and now rather widely maligned black man, Mr. Barack Obama, whose unprecedented rise to popularity on the ticket of hope and change was followed inevitably by disillusionment and backlash from both sides of the U.S. political binary. This is a world in which—largely because of Obama’s election, which came with the aid of a great many white American votes, and whose potential for hope reached its apex with Obama’s 2009 Nobel Peace Prize—some have oddly declaimed the advent of post-raciality. In these minds, there is a sense that the time of fighting for equal racial rights has passed—for, after all, the ultimate symbol of citizenship has been achieved: there is a black man in the White House, and this indicates to many how far the United States and the West have come since the days of chattel slavery, of lynch mobs and murders at the polls, of “We Shall Overcome” and “I Have a Dream”—indeed even since the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson verdicts wrought a chasm down the middle of American racial politics.

Undoubtedly, much has changed. The lunch counters, once the site of iconic moments of overt racism, have long been integrated. City buses in metropolitan areas,

while populated predominately by nonwhites, do not require that blacks sit separately from whites (though often, it just happens). A black worker in Mississippi can go to the polls without the fear of un-policed violence or the threat of losing his job. The fundamental legal demands of the Civil Rights Era became laws governed and accepted (for the most part) as the rights of United States citizens of all colors to live integrated into the American national identity. That this much has changed is evident. But to claim that these changes are indicative of a moment beyond race or racism is to mistake certain racist acts for the racist ideologies that inspire them, to ignore the ways in which systems of thought progress organically over time, and to engage in an act of denial that is as deadly as it is exonerating.

Thus, while many believe that the current age bears a mitigated or reduced need to discuss notions of race (because, as the pundit-fueled argument goes, to bring it up is to be a “race-baiter” or to play the “race card”), that the real way to eradicate racism is to ignore race altogether, to treat everyone as though he or she is a white male, to say that institutional racism is dead, and, poof, it disappears, merely a ghost in the minds of the misguided masses, the contemporary evidence to the contrary is striking. For not only do inequalities in housing, in schooling, in wealth, in incarceration rates, and in life expectancy persist along “racial” lines<sup>1</sup>, but there is also a great deal of evidence to attest to the fact that race remains a significant factor in determining what can be termed the ontological or spiritual quality of life for groups of people within the Western world. The quality-of-life problem in regards to race, I argue, results from the articulation of racial

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<sup>1</sup> “In many urban neighborhoods, teenage pregnancy and crime rates among Black youth remain at worrisome levels, unemployment remains scandalously high, many children grow up in schools and neighborhoods overrun by gangs and drug trafficking, and more African American fathers are incarcerated than graduate from high school (Kunjufu 2004)” (Merry 36).



markers along hierarchical structural lines, which allow for people and “value” to be implicated within the symbolic defining terms of a racial epistemology. In other words, we still live in a world where no bit of information about a person is considered more telling, in terms of “value,” than that person’s race. And the “values” have been predetermined.

One illustration of this phenomenon can be found in a recent Anderson Cooper *AC 360* segment, in which the famous doll test used by Kenneth and Mamie Clarke in the 1950s *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* case to prove the perils of “segregated” education<sup>2</sup> was revisited. In the original test<sup>3</sup>, black children were asked to choose between white and black dolls, granting them positive or negative attributes. The study found that these black children, at an overwhelming rate, attributed positive characteristics to white dolls, while attributing negative characteristics to black dolls. These findings were used as proof that a segregated education was an inferior education because it taught students of color that they were inferior to white students. The study helped to convince the Supreme Court that “separate but equal” education was “damaging to black children” (Read 9).

Extending the test to both black and white children, the *AC 360* revisit of the Clarke experiment sought to determine the extent to which, in the purportedly post-racial age of Obama, the racial perspectives of the past remained. A total of 133 children from eight schools in metropolitan Atlanta and New York were divided into two age groups:

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<sup>2</sup> This test was also famously revisited in 2006 by teenage filmmaker Kiri Davis for a documentary entitled *A Girl Like Me*. See the video on her official website, <[www.kiridavis.com](http://www.kiridavis.com)>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the official presentation of the Kenneth and Mamie Clark doll experiment, please visit the Library of Congress’s online exhibit at <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-brown.html>>.

five-year-olds and eight-year-olds. Renowned child psychologist and University of Chicago professor Margaret Beale Spencer designed the tests, which were administered by three psychologists. The children were asked to distinguish between the graduated skin tones of five cartoon figures, attributing positive and negative qualities to the cartoon of their choice. The researchers found that a significant portion of the children—both black and white—gave positive attributes to the lighter skinned drawings and negative attributes to the darker skinned drawings. CNN.com highlights one test, where a five-year-old white girl has chosen the white cartoon as the “good” child because, as she says, “I think it looks like me.” And then, as her mother watches on, she selects the dark skinned cartoon as the “ugly” one, because “she’s a lot darker.” At this, the child’s mother descends into tears. When asked where her daughter’s apparently racialized ideas came from, the mother says that she does not know. According to the mother, the daughter “[had] never asked about her race” (Cooper).

From where, then, does this idea come? What, in this purportedly late and progressive time, could be at the root of this cultural persistence of a preference of white over black, of the association of lighter skin tones with desirable attributes, and of darker skin tones with undesired attributes? The sample was tantalizingly small; a study focusing on only 133 children from two exceptional populations leaves a great deal of room for the eternal apologists of the subtle, foundational racism still extant in American identity to claim this a case of self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, when reading over many of the virtually anonymous comments made on the online story, one finds many instances of this counterargument. However, any astute analysis will reveal this counterargument

as the denial it is. Any astute analysis will necessarily reveal that, in fact, the Western world of 2011 is anything but post-racial, and that the dream of post-raciality is just that—a dream. The West can never be post-racial or post-racist until it admits to itself that it is, fundamentally, racial and racist, and to a much greater degree than that with which it has ever fully engaged.

To imagine a world free of racism requires an understanding of the denial inherent in responses like that of the five-year-old girl's mother—denial marked by what is apparently the subsuming of the manifest racial codes of Western culture under a cloak of genuine obliviousness. In order to understand why and how this denial occurs, it would be useful to examine how, in the West, we think about ourselves in terms of race, to reveal the possibilities of hidden influences or beliefs held so deep as to avoid notice as evident concepts in the general cultural logic of the West.

It is a widely known and inescapable fact that once upon a time the United States and European nations engaged in a form of human servitude and brutality solidified along racial lines. We Americans are all aware, despite revisionist attempts to mute the pain this awareness elicits, that the natives who lived in the so-called New World before the Europeans “discovered” it were systematically slaughtered and displaced; that after this destruction commenced, and indeed in concert with it, tens of millions of Africans were transported in the cargo holds of ships across the Atlantic and forced to work in the farms and homes of the wealthy and white until they left this world knowing that their children and grandchildren would face the same fate; that when America needed workers to construct the system of railroads that would help to establish the fledgling nation at the

forefront of a new capitalist order, it imported them from China and elsewhere; that even today, children in sweatshops in faraway lands wear themselves down to points manufacturing the goods we wear, and men and women from our neighbors to the south pick the produce we consume for below-subsistence wages—we all know that, in short, domination is a fundamental aspect of the American national identity. For the greater part of this nation's history, this domination has taken a form that justified itself overwhelmingly through a hierarchy of race.

It should also be clear by now that the implications of this domination extend beyond the physical. In the system of symbols governing thought in the West, red, black, yellow, and brown as racial identifiers have been set up as dialectical opposites to the national identity of American, which was made synonymous with the white racial identity by those endowed with the power to shape the Logos, the creative order, of the new nation. As many theorists, including but not limited to the ones I will examine below, have argued, the racial landscape has taken on the quality of the Hegelian dialectic, so named after German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel's conceptualization of how systems of thought work to arrive at objectivity. Hegel is properly understood as the major identifier of dialectical thought, though it has been argued that dialectical thought is at least as old as the Greeks (Limnatis 1). In the dialectic, the positive identity, or thesis, exists in opposition to the negative identity, or antithesis, until a point of synthesis merges the two (generally, the antithesis is destroyed or consumed by the thesis) and the process repeats itself. The ultimate end of a dialectical process would be a total synthesis into a complete whole. The 'whole,' for the purposes of this discussion, is humanity,

defined more specifically in the social form of the modern nation, to the extent to which citizenship in the Western world presumes humanity. According to Michelle Wright, the dialectic was fundamental to the construction of the modern nation, because it constructed an identity that could be simplified and uniform, against which Others had a very specific inimical role (Wright 38). In the case of American racial identity, the white/American/human is posited as the thesis and the black or Other as its antithesis. The synthesis occurs when the diverse black or Other identities are subsumed or co-opted into that of the rather uniform and rigid white/American/human identity.

In addition, the white, American (or more accurately, Western) and human were conflated identities against which all “other” identities were actually contrasted as subordinates, minorities, or “subalterns”—each of these terms merely a specialized way of saying that the racial and cultural identities of these people were considered less than—because different from—the white human norm. As Wright notes, the “narrow binary of self and Other” brings about a situation in which the diverse nonwhite identities can be simplified, and reduced to that of the “Other” (37).

Thus this contemporary age, this time after modernism and after so much else, is informed by, not beyond, its racist underpinnings. In fact, neither the Presidency, nor any symbol of social achievement for black Americans, can eradicate the cause of racism in the West—its *episteme*, the cultural order that informs how its adherents come to gain knowledge about the world, and about the role of race in that world.

As examined by French post-structuralist thinker Michel Foucault, an episteme is described as the total order of knowledge of a specific time and people, or, as he terms it,

“the fundamental codes of a culture” (*The Order of Things* xx). In the *Order of Things*, Foucault examines the Western episteme in its development from the sixteenth century (what the French call the Classical Age) through its major shifts that lead up to the twentieth century. Foucault calls this act of uncovering the epistemic foundations of the West archaeology, not history. The distinction between the two is important because in many ways the progressions between systems of thought are not discrete phenomena that can be applied to a linear narrative. There is no point at which, for instance, all people in the West stopped believing that the earth was flat—indeed some still believe this today. Rather, the theoretical archaeologist is concerned with the nature of the shift itself—not when something happened so much as how a frame of thought came into being and use, the ways in which ideas and events flow into and inform one another. This is not to say that temporality does not play a big factor here—both Foucault and those who follow in his footsteps utilize the concepts of time to place the shift at a point in human memory (this or that Age)—but the historical period in which an epistemic event occurred is subordinate in importance to the ways in which the systems of thought in existence at the moment in question communicated. Foucault’s method clarifies somewhat the ways in which disciplines traditionally considered unrelated often share common ancestry and can mutually inform one another’s development.

Today, the limits of our conceptualizations in regards to race are still marked by what theorist Sylvia Wynter addresses as the fundamental Order/Chaos dynamic of premodern times assigned in the last few centuries to the marker of skin color, and, in the last few decades, of race-inflected sociopolitical interest (“Ceremony” 42). In other

words, what the contemporary world often regards (or accepts without regarding) as immutable signs of difference—skin tone, hair texture, facial physiognomy—are actually merely symbols for the actual system which governs our attitudes about these differences: the system of Order versus Chaos.

Wynter's "The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism" describes the ways in which epistemes can and have shifted. She notes at least three major shifts in the structural oppositions underlying the Western episteme, since the Enlightenment: the "founding heresy"<sup>4</sup> of the secular and human-based *Studia Humanitatis* against the orthodoxy set forth by the religious order of the Classical age ("Ceremony" 21); the shift in the nineteenth century during the Industrial Age from the structural opposition of Reason and its lack-state to a more solidified human/non-human opposition, culminating in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which brought into being the Marxist state and a shift in conceptualizations from "Man to the Verbal Symbol Proletarian" ("Ceremony" 24); and most recently, the shift initiated in the 1960s in Western academic culture which brought about the so-called New Studies of Black Studies, Women's Studies and other studies of marginalized people in the academy and which marked what Wynter sees as a fundamental shift in the way the contemporary Western world conceptualized those identities it placed to the margins—namely, women and people of color. Not only did this last shift change the way women and people of color were conceptualized, but also it changed the way the world viewed classification itself. Beginning in the late 1960s and

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<sup>4</sup> Wynter employs the concept of heresy as applied by Polish philosopher Kolakowski, who argued that "all realms of culture, philosophy, as much as arts and custom, exemplify a fundamental antagonism, whereby everything that is new comes out of the permanent need to question all existing absolutes...so that though 'every rebellion is therefore metamorphosed into a conservative state,' nevertheless 'each of these movements makes room for the next phase where its own absolutes will, in return, be the object of criticism'" (Wynter 21).

moving into the 1970s, the West saw concepts of societal relativity—a fundamental aspect of the Postmodern—rise to the forefront of discourse in official spaces.

According to Wynter, the original *Studia Humanitatis* was the teaching office that marked the secularization of knowledge in the West. In the Late Middle Ages, when the *Studia* was introduced, theology was the hegemonic or Orthodox state against which the study of the humanities (Humanism) and the institutionalized system of lay learning came into being (“Ceremony” 22). Thus, the original study of the humanities was fundamentally heretical, because it broke with the previously rigid Orthodox religious order, what Wynter terms the “higher system of divinely sanctioned identity and ... its absolutized world views and ratiomorphic apparatus” (25). As Wynter puts it, the *Studia* “releas[ed] ... rhetorical man from the margins” and granted the West an episteme which allowed for new conceptual possibilities (25). Once Man was separated from the absolutized religious order, it became freer to raise heretofore heretical questions, and approached the world in fundamentally different ways. This gave rise to the possibility of the human sciences, which addressed with scientific vigor the problems of humankind once considered the express domain of the Church. The release of Man from the religious Orthodoxy came as a result of the tension brought about by the marginalization of those whose birth granted them neither Divine Right nor “Noble Blood” (34). It was from this population that the elevation of Reason as the fundamental defining feature of the human being emerged.

The study of the humanities in the Late Middle Ages, therefore, eschewed the totalizing and externalizing foundations of the *Theologos* for a more ground-based,



human-centered, proto-scientific and empirical foundation, or *Logos* (25). This *Logos*, marked by such historical events as the de-centering of Earth and the sun from the universal order, the subsequent “discovery” of the New World and development in the empirical and theoretical sciences, made it possible on a scale as wide as civilization to conceptualize a world fundamentally different from that of the age preceding it. *Logos* then itself became the Orthodox state against which so-called New Studies could be defined.

The shift in the 1960s made evident by the call for New Studies was a modern parallel to the original shift instituted by the *Studia Humanitatis* in the Classical period, what Sir Stafford Beer termed a “rewriting of knowledge” (“Ceremony” 21). Because theology in the Late Middle Ages in Europe was the hegemonic or Orthodox state, the counterhegemonic act became in fact heretical. With every shift, regardless of the nature of the Orthodox state of the time, the counterhegemonic act has always taken on the quality of heresy (21). This is important to note because, from the Enlightenment onward, arguments in favor of white (or male) superiority have always taken on the quality of convictions, rather than empirical or logical facts, even when allegedly justified by the “science” of the time. Those in positions of scientific power often ignored the evidence and bent the evidence to support white supremacist perspectives on humanity that had no basis in empirical science. These perspectives led to formulations of blackness in the West that defined the black as antithetical to white, and marked its positive expression as a form of heresy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In her discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and the trope of masking, Michelle Wright points out that while Du Bois’s Negro “is not reconciled, split, he is not contradictory.... Instead, the (racist) white American is being contradictory” (82). Wynter argues that Du Bois resolves the

The concept of heresy is also valid in that it defines the boundaries (or lack thereof) for punishing the chaotic and heretical. For instance, the American practice of lynching, a frenzied public execution whose victims were often tortured and dismembered before being burned alive and put on display, stands as a perfect example of the religiosity with which the idea of race has taken root in the Western episteme. The primary charge for a public lynching was, of course, rape—black males were said to have crossed the special boundary separating whites and blacks and entered into a forced sexual relationship with an unwilling (by definition) white female. The racial dynamics of the Western Orthodoxy which posited the black as antithesis made the miscegenous act in fact heretical, courting chaos. And the only means to treat chaos, since the dawn of humanity, is through a sacrifice to the “gods” of the age. Therefore, lynching acted as a function of the order/chaos dynamic whose purpose was to restore order to the racist episteme.

Wynter argues that there has always been, amongst the Orthodox state’s marginalized, a mode of counter-acting the epistemological affects on their spiritual well being. Just as those whose power resided in the Orthodox state have recognized that the order/chaos dynamic is a battle waged on a level beyond the physical, into the realm of the ontological, psychic or spiritual, so the people of marginalized identity within that episteme have also fought against their domination in ways that transcended the physical. The “Ceremony” of Wynter’s title refers to an act by marginalized people to step beyond

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contradiction inherent in the dual consciousness of the American Negro through the idea of the veil. This veil, she argues, is what separates the material existence of the Negro, who is posited as Other/antithesis and therefore inferior, from the internal experience of the Negro American, who is indeed a valid subject, but who is treated as inferior only because of its symbolic representation in the West as the antithesis or symbol of Chaos.

the epistemic limitations present in the Orthodox hegemonic state. This happens in many ways, be they outright revolution or a diminishing of the perceived power of the hegemonic arguments; that is, simply ceasing to believe in the lies the hegemonic structure tells about itself for its own gain. Therefore, Wynter notes, the Orthodox, dominant, hegemonic nature of an episteme founded upon an order/chaos conceptualization (where there can be such a thing as, for instance, heresy, or man/non-man) must interdict “any ceremony which might yoke the antithetical signifiers and breach the dynamics of order/Chaos, through which the order brings itself into living being; a dynamics which functions like the code of the presence/absence of butyric acid for the tick, to prescribe the seeking/avoiding behavior through which one realizes oneself as one or the other form of self-tropeing rhetorical human” (“Ceremony” 27).

In contemporary times, the ordering structure of knowledge has been informed by the worldwide presence of a system of life, the *weltanschauung* of capitalism. By capitalism, I mean the system of thought which conceptualizes commodification and wage/slave labor as the essences of the contemporary time, in whose ethic the profit margin is determined as a universal good, and within whose system of ontology the acquisition of socioeconomic status and upper class identity represents the apex of being. In this way, capitalism is more than an economic system; it is a way of thinking. It is a foundation upon which the contemporary knowledge of the world is built, and within which certain knowledge of the world operates. It has a logic, an ethics, an epistemology and even an ontology of its own. Within the world it articulates, it is not merely a philosophy amongst many; it is philosophy itself.

Capitalism manifests itself on the social level by defining what is real and what is not, what is worthy of social consumption and what will be marginalized—and the capitalism of the Postmodern age, marked in the United States by recent multitrillion dollar bailouts and the looming aura of national debt, is one in which the market itself is the determinant. Watching the news, one is struck by the public political debate that reflects/informs a cultural ethic which considers the market economy as the ultimate referent. The U.S. Navy’s most recent slogan—“A Global Force for Good”—belies a fundamental parallel between force and good, in a time motivated by a preoccupation with the securing of limited and declining natural resources, most notably oil, and the continued push to perpetuate “our way of life”—explicitly, “democracy;” and implicitly, market-driven Western capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

As this example indicates, in order to maintain the interests of the order, the element of force goes hand-in-hand with an element of propaganda. Indeed, the Navy (and other armed forces within and without the West) benefits from both the complicity and willed blindness of the citizens of the West, who stomach the realities of such wars as we have found ourselves in as of late with stories that reinforce the infallibility of US intent. According to its official web site, the Navy “makes the world as we know it possible.”<sup>7</sup> Thus the idea is sustained—the force and violence undergirding the suspension of the West as a free market, economy-focused society is posited as fundamental to its identity.

I want to reinforce the suggestion that this violence is not limited to the physical. The US Navy is a vivid example of a cross-cultural phenomenon governed by a

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<sup>6</sup> US Navy Official Website. <<http://www.navy.com/navy/about/gffg.html>>. Last accessed 3 August 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

philosophy that sees the implementation of the “world as we know it” as the multi-pronged battle it is. I argue that the violence which takes place below the surface, on the “lower frequencies,” if I may borrow a phrase from Ralph Ellison, is all the more nefarious because of its potential for viral growth and distribution. Because it evades material locality, the epistemic or ontological violence of the capitalist ethic in the West can occur on the level of the subconscious, and is often a far more difficult form of violence to counter than material violence.

Since its fundamental focus is the securing of profit margins, even at the expense of a modern standard human quality of life for many marginalized people, market capitalism requires a conceptualization of the world that makes it possible to subsume human beings into the products of the system in which they take part. The American practice of slavery, besides being an extreme act of marginalization, fell well within the logic of capitalist ideology. In fact, slavery can rightly be termed “capitalism with its clothes off” (Gilroy 15; Moseley 42). In its naked and proto-modern state, capitalism reduced human beings to commodities traded in a market alongside other merchandise for the purpose (from the perspectives of the seller and the buyer) of turning profit. The urge to justify this treatment, while at the same time maintaining the elevation of what was becoming a sort of new “enlightened” human being over the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, provided much of the impetus for the construction of race in the West. Where treatment was undeniably inhumane, justifications were developed that simply altered the human status of those treated inhumanely. The “Laws” section of Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* stands as a clear example of this practice. Famous for the

phraseology that declared all men “equal” and divinely endowed with “inalienable rights,” Jefferson neglected to offer such egalitarian terms when writing about Africans in America. On the topic of blacks, Jefferson argued that “the difference” between the races “is fixed in nature,” and that this difference was the “foundation” of “a greater or less share of beauty in the two races.” He compared the purported natural affection black men had for white women with that of the “Oranootan” to black women, claiming that the animal is actually more attracted to black women than “those of its own species” (Jefferson 264-5).<sup>8</sup> These words—from one of the original defenders of Western Enlightenment concepts of equality, who happened himself to be a slave owner—delineated an insurmountable gulf between the races, justifying the current practice of slavery, even as Jefferson enjoyed (and still enjoys) an image as an antislavery advocate (Wright 31). Furthermore, that he was indeed an antislavery advocate only accentuates the reality of the widespread nature of the ideas of black inferiority in the West—and draws attention to the phenomenon of widely shared, yet widely ignored, notions within an episteme. I argue that the lack of focus<sup>9</sup> on Jefferson’s argument of permanent black inferiority constitutes an act of willful blindness in Western culture, and it is through this willed blindness to the immorality of the enterprise that the system of capitalism was able to initiate the commodification of human beings. The blindness pervading the contemporary racial episteme undergirds the perpetuation of ideas that can and do lead to an aversion to blackness, the origins of which may be unclear to the contemporary mind holding these aversions.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, the term ‘species’ originates from the Latin ‘specere,’ ‘to look,’ the derivative of which, ‘species,’ contains shades of meaning including ‘beauty, form and appearance.’

<sup>9</sup> See Wright 54-65.

Today, we live in the age of what Fredric Jameson calls “multinational capital” — a moment in the development of capital where the system of capitalism is marked by an infiltration into heretofore protected spaces, by penetration and colonization of “Nature and the Unconscious; that is, the destruction of Third World agriculture by the Green Revolution, and the rise of the media and the advertising industry” (Jameson 36). Such infiltration is part of what is meant by Postmodernity and the decline of actual referents for meaning. As Baudrillard illustrated in his 1981 book, *Simulation and Simulacra*, Postmodernism elevates the meaningless to the status of meaning. Through a process of simulation and the development of simulacra, or simulations of simulations, the postmodern world creates a gap between man’s essence and his constructs, and imbues those constructs with the power and legitimacy of those aspects of the world which preceded mankind and civilization, traditionally seen as fellow creations and beyond the reach of man (Baudrillard 1-7; 79-85).

In the West, capitalism-driven constructs made it possible to effectively ignore the ways in which American postmodernism implicated itself throughout the world via mass media, public policy, and the exceptionalist attitude so many in the so-called third world can instantly recognize. This is no longer the case. With the enchantment of the West slowly fading, Westerners are forced to see the world in ways unlike ever before. This is only the beginning. As global unrest, uprisings and spirited revolutions sweep the globe, while in the West, many citizens, increasingly critical of the ways in which capitalism (no longer a benefit to them) is playing out, resort to tired racial scapegoating, the truth becomes clear as day: if the new millennium is to be a leap forward for humanity, it will

be such only if it resolves one of its greatest and most self-revealing problems of the past half-millennium: the problem of race.

In order to adequately address the problem of race in the postmodern West, we must be prepared to examine the ways in which race, as a function of the postmodern society, has infiltrated spaces rarely considered addressable by cultural critique. We have to look, as it were, at what race does to the essence of a person in an age where personhood reveals itself to be an increasingly more difficult and complex affair than it may originally have seemed to the Enlightenment thinkers. For the racially marginalized, the process of claiming an identity in a world that posits them as antithesis or Other has been an ongoing and multileveled struggle. Out of this struggle blossomed the voices of those whose fight for self-definition laid the framework upon which the traditions of expression in the West were built.



## Chapter II: Blackness And Self Definition

Central to the comprehensive attempt to bring men nearer to God, to breach the interdiction of ceremonies between the Agathos/Deilos categories of the celestial and the terrestrial, was to be the rise of the vernacular narrative representations, *pari passu* with the Studia's turn to the ancient models and its valorization of profane letters and the auctoritas of their deployment--their valorization, then, of the works of the human imagination vis a vis the Scriptures as Divine Revelation (“Ceremony” 31).

The development of racial identity has been influenced greatly by the Order/Chaos dynamic of the Western episteme. For those whose fate it was to be labeled on the “Chaos” side of the racial binary, problems of identity construction became a fact of life. As Du Bois famously remarked in *The Souls of Black Folk*, for black people in the West attempting to assimilate into Orthodox Western culture as American citizens, there existed always the threat of “two-ness,” of the inherent conflict of antithetical identities held within a single conceptualization of a person (38). In dialectical terms, blackness, as antithesis, found itself imperiled at the moment of synthesis, as its cooptation into the American identity cost the black person in America, in whose “dark

body” this conflict waged, a unified subjectivity (38). As many have argued, prominent amongst them historicists like Carter G. Woodson (whose works were a primary impetus for the movements that brought Black Studies into the academy), black people seeking recognition as human subjects within Western culture are further harmed by the Orthodoxy’s insistence on the marginalization-through-erasure of difference. This is what Othering does—it erases the unique and particular identity of the Other by devaluing it, omitting it, and representing it as the form of Chaos. This act of erasure—and the blindness that follows from it, both for those whose identities fall within the Orthodox mode and those whose identities have been marginalized—undergirds the process by which white, American, and human has historically been achieved. For black Americans, this act of erasure began at the moment when, aboard the slave ship, the ancestors of contemporary African Americans said goodbye to their homeland, and the peoples, cultures, languages and memories rooted therein.

In a section of her study/memoir, *Lose Your Mother*, entitled “The Family Romance,” Saidiya Hartman illustrates how this act of erasure can affect even those contemporary African Americans whose knowledge of the chilling facts of their ancestry is astute and academic. Listing the base enumerations of the slave trade, Hartman notes her awareness that “slaves sometimes languished for as long as four months on board a slaver until a ‘complete cargo’ had been purchased,” that the slaves were referred to as “*kop*, or head, as in head of cattle, and not *hoof’d*, as in human head,” and that “the death rates of the slave trade ... ‘reached 70% before the survivors were adjusted to life in the Western Hemisphere’” (78-9).

Such enumerations are indicative of the typical contemporary means by which the dramatic erasure at the foundation of African American identity is quantified and addressed. But taken at face value, ship ledger reports and insurance claims lack the spiritual efficacy to inform the development of a subject healed from the devastation that the slave trade inflicted upon his or her ancestors. Certainly, the brute facts of slavery are important in that they can communicate in the language of the present time the realities of slavery, “but,” Hartman asks, “what did all this information add up to? None of it would ever compensate for all the other things that I would never know. None of it had brought me any closer to replacing a lacuna with a name or an X-ed space with an ancestral village” (79). In this way, the peculiar institution dehumanized not only those who were enslaved, but also those whose fate it was to be the progeny of the enslaved. Lacking direct knowledge of the people, languages, cultures and in many cases the spiritual points of reference from which one came, every black American whose family legacy includes enslavement in the West is beset with some rather inevitable absences in the construction of his or her identity.

There is, Hartman contends, an inescapable void at the center of black identity in the West—a void that retains its ontological weight, even as black Americans become increasingly willing to engage with the historical and quantifiable facts of their heritage, as DNA tests to tell you which African “tribe” you actually derived from, and as tourist trips to West Africa to rekindle a link to the “motherland” proliferate in unprecedented numbers. There remains, through all of this, an absence at a central core of African American identity that is impervious to modern intervention. No one can replace the

millions lost between the slave coasts and the New World; nor can forgotten languages, places, stories—the building blocks of culture—be reconciled. Thus, the epistemic violence wrought against the Africans who came to the West in its inception continues to affect the development of American black identity to this day.

Indeed, that blacks even survived the violence of this epistemologically paradoxical (or at least perilous) state, both here and not, present and erased, to come to a sense of self-value at all, is one of the great miracles of modern humanity, and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit upon which they so depended. It is true that Black Americans have the distinction of being the only group<sup>10</sup> of people present in the New World before, during, and after the revolutionary struggles for nationhood, who still have no nation or territory of their own to claim—that is, no nation in which their presence is not that of the “minority.” The implications of this are great: without a nation to which they may look, with a continental identifier (“African” or “African-”) still regarded in the West as “backwards,” “Third World,” or “developing”—and what’s more, without a discernible and widely known or well-preserved historical record outside of/before New World slavery, African Americans are born into circumstances that threaten to leave their subjectivity fragmented and removed. Lacking ontological points of reference to which he can refer that validate his blackness as well as his humanity (rather than Orthodox points of reference that still posit his blackness as the symbol of Chaos), the contemporary black person faces difficulty in transcending the void to which Hartman refers.

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<sup>10</sup> This can also be argued for many Native American groups, who, while perhaps granted cursory land in the form of reservations, were also the victims of forced relocation and epistemic violence to such a degree that the reservation itself could be conceptualized less as a territory, and more as a holding ground, the last minute bastion of once vibrant cultures.

Over the years, blacks in the West have negotiated this void in a variety of ways, which for the purposes of this work I divide into three rather broad approaches. These approaches are my best appropriation of the general conversation people of African descent in the Americas have had about how to deal with the void for the past four centuries and beyond. While they are not exhaustive, I do believe they represent the three most central approaches blacks have taken, both personally and collectively, in the drive to attain a fuller subjecthood in a world that denied them that status, and to transcend the dehumanization enslavement brought into being through affirmations of humanity.

The first approach involves the black subject's attempt to be free of the weight of race altogether. It can be found in contemporary times among black Americans who conceptualize themselves foremost as Americans, and who, like those who mistakenly believe that the West could solve its racial problem by ceasing to mention race, seek avenues whereby the discussion of race can be avoided. This approach is problematic in obvious ways: to avoid the discussion of race is not to be free of its influence, nor can personal avoidance eliminate the presence one's race has in the mind of the Orthodox state, which has based a great deal of ontological hegemony on the premise of race. The advantage of this approach is its universal truth—certainly, everyone today “knows” that race itself is a myth, and that the extent to which we believe in it limits its transcendence. However, the social, measurable reality of race, or its physical reality, manifests both in the brute sociological facts as well as the internal experience of contemporary black American existence. In other words, while race is certainly a social construct, this social constructedness in no way diminishes its reality in terms social and even beyond. What

we must ask is not whether race's social constructedness diminishes its ontological effect—it doesn't (because what human ontology is there devoid from the social?)—but rather why does Western society have so much invested in convincing black subjects (via post-race rhetoric) that race can only be transcended (and thus the racial subject liberated) by means administered by the Orthodox state? To obscure alternative perspectives is to interdict the potentially liberating Ceremony to which Wynter refers (27).

The second approach arises out of the solitude of marginalization, a desire to reconnect with the African past. Mexican writer Octavio Paz has explained this yearning:

The feeling of solitude, which is a nostalgic yearning for the body from which we were cast out, is a longing for a place. According to an ancient belief, held by virtually all peoples, that place is the center of the world, the navel of the universe. Sometimes it is identified with paradise, and both of these with the group's *real or mythical place of origin* (208; my italics).

Inspired by the cultural memory of a time and place beyond the West, blacks have sought revolutionary means of regaining or replenishing the historical African self. The examples of this are numerous, and include but are by no means limited to the first slave revolts and uprisings that occurred aboard the slavers crossing the Atlantic; the great Haitian Revolution, helped along, as history (and C.L.R. James)<sup>11</sup> tells us, by Africanist language and spirituality; the back-to-Africa and other nationalist relocation movements of the nineteenth century headed by Martin Delany and others, which acted as precursors to Marcus Garvey's massive Universal Negro Improvement Association and its call for

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<sup>11</sup> See James p. 86.

repatriation of Western blacks back to Africa in the opening decades of the twentieth century; the Rastafari faith, which is predicated on the belief in an African homeland for all black, and which gained massive influence in Garvey's Jamaica and throughout the world through its greatest messenger, Bob Marley; the nation of Islam and its derivative Afrocentric faiths, which are predicated upon the belief that there existed a time in the past when blacks were beyond oppression, and that through these faiths blacks may return to a higher being; and any number of Afrocentric academic and creative works which look to a past state of greatness, the discovering and retelling of long-forgotten stories about African kingdoms, of prior African greatness, the consciousness of which might lead blacks in the West to the sort of ontological liberation that would lead to the filling of the inevitable void to which Hartman refers.

The third approach often emerges from the acceptance that for all intents and purposes, direct memories of the Africa of their ancestral past have been lost—in a sense, outside of the operative episteme—and that strict restoration as such is impossible. Accepting the African ancestral past as virtually inaccessible, many black Americans have sought the creation of a new subjectivity within the West, predicated upon both what history can offer, and the peculiar experiences of being a “black” in the West. Rather than seeking to restore a glorious racial past, advocates of this approach seek to create something altogether new, with the stories of the African past as inspiration, but not as models. This approach is distinct in that it arises neither from the search for a complete removal from blackness nor a complete immersion into the liberation mythos at the heart of restoration approaches. One embodiment of this approach might be a figure

like Barack Obama, not only because his ancestry (devoid of New World enslavement) is indicative of the many ways in which people can come to be recognized as “African American” and thus problematizes the identity itself, but also because he retains his politically-astute identity as a black man despite the incongruity that identity has had since the beginning of the West with the position he has acquired. This incongruity necessarily and immediately caused an epistemic shift in the American definition of President of the United States.

Each of these approaches gestures to the fact that within the construction of African American identities there remains the necessity to deal with the absences slavery has wrought. Of the major means blacks have used to respond to the ontological voids brought on by slavery, the creative act stands out as the most powerful. In American black communities, artists have always persisted on the advance guard of the sort of epistemological innovation that allowed for new possibilities to be imagined. Even as champions of the Orthodox state attempted to elide the beauty that emerged from this dispossessed people (in an effort to justify mistreating them), creation rose from tragedy, again and again. Phillis Wheatley, who Thomas Jefferson famously derided in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, designating her work “below the dignity of criticism,”<sup>12</sup> was the first published black poet in what would become the United States of America. Her work, while often pedantic, often uncritically bowing to the images of greatness

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<sup>12</sup> From *Notes* p. 267: “Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.”



presented by the orthodoxy of the West,<sup>13</sup> still contained the seed of an awareness and creative spirit which itself acted as a buffer against the insanity of the enslaved situation. Furthermore, as a black woman poet writing in an America that was not only racist but also brutally patriarchal and phallogentric, Wheatley's work was a living reminder of the fallacious premises with which the epistemic boundaries to full humanhood kept the marginalized out. For if it were true that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the West one's humanity was based upon one's capacity for Reason, and that this capacity was limited primarily to white males,<sup>14</sup> then how could one explain a little African girl who possessed such a breadth of intellect and a gift for poetry? Such an enigma must have brought quite a bit of tension into 18<sup>th</sup> century racist ideologies. One can almost understand Jefferson's necessity for his banal insult. Wheatley's very existence threatened the entire foundation upon which racism was founded.

Addressing Wheatley in her essay collection, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker writes: "It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*" (Walker 405). Walker's analysis is prescient. She illustrates the multiple, the "alternative," even the mysterious (to the uninitiated hegemonic orthodoxy) purpose of the song itself. Torn from everything and reduced to a form of servitude both humiliating and ontologically debilitating, the enslaved African in America was forced to hold onto what little remained of her humanity, even as the allegedly brightest minds of that time sought to deny that humanity. Furthermore, Walker's "notion of song" might be understood as a treasured cultural affect, the

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<sup>13</sup> Consider, for instance, her poems "On Being Brought from Africa to America" on Wheatley p. 42; and "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty" on Wheatley p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> See "Ceremony" p. 35.

proliferation of which marked the active survival of a liminal people through its continual rejection of the limitations imposed upon them by the Orthodox episteme.

For blacks wishing to articulate their experiences and identities in a system that defined them as less than human, to find a means of renaming themselves in a way that empowered, rather than diminished (as the naming system applied to the enslaved in America often did, marking the enslaved with the names of the master) was a most essential and important task. Black thinkers and artists have always recognized that the power of naming implied agency and thus true subjectivity. Furthermore, naming bears special significance because it implicates a wider and more present power already granted the highest honor amongst Africans, even prior to their presence in America; that is, the power of the Word. As Robin Horton notes,

In traditional African cultures, to know the name of a being or thing is to have some degree of control over it. In the invocation of spirits, it is essential to call their names correctly; and the control which such correct calling gives is one reason why the true or 'deep' names of gods are often withheld from strangers, and their utterance forbidden to all but a few whose business it is to use them in ritual (Horton 157).

If this is true, it becomes quite clear why so many who have struggled under the weight of racial marginalization in the West have sought a means by which they might acquire the names slavery had taken from them: it is through the name, through how one is called, that one actuates oneself. If the only legitimate invocation, for instance, is one in which the name of the spirit summoned is known and said correctly, then devoid of a

true name, blacks in the West have been subject to a form of cosmic violence whereby the actual self is called by the name of the Other—the simplistic absence that, while playing the clear role of the Chaos term in the Western binary episteme, bears no productive or clear purpose from the internal perspective of the black person. This sterility emerges as a result of the fact that the name comes from a point of reference outside of the black experience. When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. lamented, in his “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,”<sup>15</sup> that among the injustices his people faced was the generalized, dehumanizing names “nigger,” “boy,” and “John,” he was not merely complaining about a lack of respect. Like the Africans from whom he came, Dr. King was aware of the transcendent power of naming.

The dehumanizing name was an act of ontological violence, a reminder of enslavement. It was never intended to aid in the ontological actualization of black people, but rather to be another means by which black agency could be undercut. Epistemologically, these names became a means by which the Hegelian synthesis might occur, whereby the black/Chaos term could be erased, or subsumed into the Orthodox identity—at the obvious expense of all of the unpalatable aspects of African identities and worldviews. In short, in order to be empowered, blacks had to name themselves. It is at least for these reasons that the acquisition of a correct name, or of a correct set of names, has consistently been one of the fundamental causes undertaken by blacks who sought to positively re-define blacks in the West.

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<sup>15</sup> To those clergymen and Southern whites who thought Dr. King’s efforts for equality were too soon, he responded: “...[W]hen your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.” at <[http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)>.

In Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm explains the rationale behind the practice of changing one's name when one entered the Nation of Islam: "The Muslim's 'X' symbolized the true African family name that he never could know. For me, my 'X' replaced the white slavemaster name of 'Little' which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears" (229). Malcolm's awareness of this split with his historical name, and the act of providing a letter synonymous with the unknown, "X," bring to light a rather under-discussed dimension of the African American search for a new/true name. As with Hartman years later, the "X" at the core of black identity symbolized the void; but unlike Hartman, Malcolm and other followers of Elijah Muhammad felt empowered by the cipher. This, as Malcolm makes clear, results at least partly from the cipher's connection with experience of the divine or holy. That he intended to keep his "X" "until God Himself returned and gave [them] a Holy Name from His own mouth," is telling in that it alludes to a point of reference beyond the West, capable of giving a true name (Haley 229). Black awareness of access to transcendent power has been of utmost importance in the act of reclaiming the power to name, and thus, the power of the Word—a power fundamental to the claiming of a ceremony that could respond to the epistemic violence of Western Orthodoxy with the creative force to imagine new possibilities.

Later, after he had taken his Hajj to Mecca, in Nigeria, Malcolm encountered a group of students, who gave him a Yoruba name: "Omowale." "I had never received a more treasured honor," he says of the day he received a "true" African name from Africans still in touch with their ancestral languages and customs (Haley 403). From

Malcolm Little, to Red, Malcom X, to Omowale, to El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz, every name signified a fundamental and personal ontological and epistemological shift. Each name marked a radically different perspective, and with each name there came (for Malcolm) a sense of empowerment over the epistemological boundaries implanted in the constructed persona of black identity in the West. Like all the varied and shifting official names for Africans in America, each name for Malcolm marked not only a new world, but also a new acceptance, a new personhood. As in the example Horton gave regarding the invocation of spirits, the new person could only be known after he had been named. Until he received the new name, he was merely in transition, potential energy awaiting a form in which to actuate itself. The new name marks arrival at the destination. Again, it is important to note that Malcolm's conversion bore the marks of a mysterious extant power neither guided nor hindered by the episteme in which he had previously operated. While it is true that Malcolm attributes this power to the divine, it is equally important to understand that this power was trans-epistemic—that is, that it was derived from a space beyond the space of the Orthodox episteme that defined blackness as the symbol of Chaos. That this force was omnipotent provided the epistemic weight necessary for the recipient of the message—the subject whose name had been changed—to suspend the doubts already present within the Orthodox state, and move forward to a new conceptualization of what it meant to be a black person, a conceptualization unhindered by limits the Orthodox West placed on black identity.

These acts of renaming on a personal level indicate the possibilities for the kind of epistemic shift that can ultimately bring about a change in the fundamental understanding

we in the West have about marginalized race identities on a wide level. For, while we speak in terms of the “fundamental codes of a culture,” no culture can exist without discrete (or semi-discrete) minds actively or passively engaging in the acceptance or rejection of concepts. With every act of renaming comes the chance not only for a new personal definition of the identity thus renamed, but also for a new way of seeing the act of naming itself. The agency implied in the self-naming, or the reclamation of one’s “old” or “true” name, undermines the Orthodox tendency to assign to its marginalized identities names intended to diminish them.

It has always been in the best interest of blacks in America to be present to the power of self-naming. Defined from without by the Orthodox state, what people within the West came to “know” about black people (and blacks are included in this number, as well) was often informed by the limitations set in the act of naming blacks in the first place. As philosopher Lewis Gordon has noted, in the normative Orthodox state, “the more present a black is qua a black, the more absent he is as a point of epistemic limitation and assertion of agency.<sup>16</sup> One doesn’t *ask* a black; one *concludes* about him” (Gordon 161-2). Historically, in order for blacks to construct frameworks of liberation, they needed first to remove their self-definitions from the controlling arm of the Orthodoxy, or else be subject to the destructive and dismissive acts inherent in Orthodox-sanctioned names.

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, during times of enslavement, agency was the last thing the hegemonic structure wanted blacks to have. This is why the curtailing of slave agency was made into law. American whites, themselves at most a generation removed from their own violent acts of revolutionary agency, were all too aware of what could happen if that spirit was roused amongst their captives. For this reason, the early centuries of American life witnessed the legislation of boundaries for black existence beyond which they could not pass without penalty. As Conrad Thompson notes, “slaves codes served a variety of functions, the most pressing of which was to protect the white community from slave insurrections” (Thompson 326). When enslaved blacks did acquire access, they invariably utilized it in acts that directly or indirectly related to the acquisition of their own freedom.

Long before Malcolm did this in the 1960s, enslaved blacks in early America drew linkages to points of reference beyond the Orthodox episteme, or to points of reference that implicated a power greater than that of their oppressors. Enslaved peoples, detached from the specifics of their spiritual practices, adopted new religions often to the extent to which those new religions allowed them a self-conceptualization that transcended that given to them by their masters.<sup>17</sup> As Makungu Akinyela reminds us, the spread of what he calls “Africanized Christianity” was an important factor in the construction of a black Ethos, and made survival and self-determination under the desperate circumstances of enslavement possible (Akinyela 264; 269-79). This dynamic allowed enslaved blacks to claim names whose holiness and transcendent truth did not posit them as the symbol of Chaos, but rather reinforced the very acts of agency that terrified the white power structure and forced the Orthodoxy to adopt codes that curtailed that agency. It is no coincidence that Gabriel Prosser, and especially the mystic Nat Turner, organizers of some of the most (in)famous slave rebellions in United States history, were preachers, and were known to have spent hours studying biblical passages that appealed to modes of revolution informed by a God on the side of the oppressed, and not subject to the material restrictions of the Orthodoxy (Akinyela 279). The element of power that transcends the material circumstances and situations governed by the Orthodox hegemony—of a Word that resounds in acts, of a people privy to prophecy and capable of reading the signs the hegemonic structure hides even from itself—is

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<sup>17</sup> While many enslaved blacks believed in the salvation afforded them by the Jesus of their masters, enslaved people also frequently made parallels between their experience in America and that of the Hebrews in Egypt. Harriet Tubman, for instance, was tellingly known as the “Black Moses” and not the “Black Jesus,” an indication of the extent to which the sense of the foreigner in a strange land thrived in the black experience pre-Emancipation; later, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Marcus Garvey was given the same moniker. These names, I argue, gesture to a sense of black ontological exile in the century before the great leaders of the Civil Rights movements.

fundamental to an understanding of black agency in the West. It is from this element that the courage to claim personhood in the face of tremendous oppressive force becomes possible, and it is only through this means that the hegemonic “interdiction” can be transcended. As we will examine a bit further in the upcoming chapters, the appeal to a trans-epistemic power informs a prophetic tradition that can be seen not only in those revolutionaries in prior centuries whose inspiration led them to upheaval against enslavement, but also in those contemporary revolutionaries who wage a battle for liberation against the ontological violence still extant in the Western epistemology.

One thing Sylvia Wynter makes clear is that the seeds of liberation are actually part and parcel of the Orthodox structure; the Orthodox structure makes its own destruction inevitable; every movement of the hegemonic orthodoxy, therefore, is always a movement whose intent is to delay that inevitability, never to actually create a permanent state. Within the structure, the marginalized perspective has the awareness of this inevitable fall on its side. In 1950, as marginalized people within imperial colonial holdings were just beginning to rise against their old masters, Martinican poet and later politician Aime Césaire published *Discours sur le colonialisme*, a meditation on and response to the hegemonic structures that allowed for the phenomenon of colonialism to exist. A founding father of the Pan Africanist poetics movement *Négritude*, Césaire made clear that he and many others who lived as marginalized people in the hegemonic structures of the West were very aware of the psychological strain the inevitability of its fall had on its adherents. Arguing that the Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century was possessed by the spirit of Hitler, Césaire suggests that even those who were not



directly cognizant of the terrible circumstances of the colonized had “a Hitler inside him.” Taking it further, Césaire takes the blind adherents of the Western episteme to task by illustrating his awareness of the unconscious (yet ubiquitous) urge that culminated in Hitler’s ascent to power. With any investigation, he argues, one will find that Hitler “*inhabits*” the “very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century”:

Hitler is his demon ... if he rails against him, he is being inconsistent ... at bottom, what he cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India, and the “niggers” of Africa (Césaire 36).

In other words, what is often presented as the heinous facet of Nazism—crimes against humanity, genocide—becomes heinous to the Orthodoxy only when visited against the privileged racial identities within the structure. That nations on both sides of the Western binary during WWII had visited upon the colored peoples of the world the very same heinous acts, in the name of empire building and “progress,” did not register within the Orthodox structure as a cause worth calling into fundamental question. Looking further, Césaire defines the Western hegemonic state of mind, and reveals within it how this urge (hidden from its adherents) was indeed inevitable. Calling any civilization which supports colonization “already a sick civilization, a civilization which

is morally diseased,” Césaire expounds upon the inevitability of this sickness manifesting in a way detrimental to the Orthodox hegemonic structure by illustrating how such a civilization “irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment” (Césaire 39).

Thus, every act of violence committed against the “Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa” became an indication of the sickness inherent in the Orthodox system. It is, in other words, in the very nature of the Orthodoxy to be susceptible to its own destruction. Every act against its marginalized people is a closure of possibility such that the marginalized have less and less with which to identify within the boundaries the episteme has made for them (and for itself through its marginalization of them), and more and more with which to identify outside of the episteme. Every act against marginalized people is therefore simultaneously an act which brings the Orthodox mode one step closer to the point at which its marginalized people, in their appeal to the trans-epistemic, form the only viable space in which the ideas can go—and the fundamental codes of the culture, then, shift. With Negritude’s celebration of blackness, Césaire and his fellow poets were, in effect, initiating a ceremony that sought to topple the ontological violence of the Orthodoxy applying the name of Chaos to black people.

For blacks in the West seeking ontological liberation, the appeal to trans-epistemic definitions of the divine, or to creative modes of expression which allowed for an identification with the mysterious, of the enigmatic and often paradoxical, have been invaluable tools for the retention of liberated identities, and for a resistance to a dialectical synthesis that would elide what little blacks had left on which to hold. Du

Boisian “two-ness,” as well as the identity gaps to which Hartman refers, while cause for great levels of ontological anguish, have always been, on the whole, preferable to that mode of being that would have all aspects of the black identity be erased in the name of uniform identity. On the contrary, a liberation-focused black identity has survived within the Orthodoxy despite the Orthodoxy’s attempts to change it. One major means by which blackness has been able to adapt to the shifting situations in the West, to survive and cultivate itself in new and profound ways, is through the arts. As creatives, black artists in the West have existed on the avant-garde, confronting Orthodoxy head-on and standing in as custodians of the spirit and history of the people.

In the next chapter, we will discuss how the concept of representation has affected the dynamics of black identity in the Western episteme. Since emancipation, blacks in the West have had limited economic and political power with which to control their destinies. Under these circumstances, the arts have been one of the few spaces in which blacks could acquire a sense of power over the factors that affect the construction of identity. Furthermore, within an episteme whose Orthodoxy manifested in hegemonic ontological violence which limited not only material movement, but also the horizons of identity development, to imagine a different world became vital to the survival of the race. These are among the reasons that many of the most famous and respected African Americans were artists. Because the creative act has been so important to the lives of blacks in America, it stands to reason that if indeed we are to detect or predict a shift in the West in regards to black identity (i.e. a space of new possibility), it will come, as it

always has, with a push from those representative members of the identity whose courage and spiritual attentiveness make it impossible for them not to create.

### Chapter III: Representing Liminality

Beginning with the words, “We the People,” the Constitution is a collective representation because it signifies the unified body of the nation, fusing that nation into a single text in which all members can find themselves represented. The Constitution's use of the first person plural symbolizes the new nation's capacity for unified collective action (Levin 2).

“I didn’t create T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. I diagnosed it.”

-Tupac Shakur

When attempting to theorize about the ways in which the Western Orthodox epistemology defines its marginalized, one of the most important questions that arises is that of representation. Several vital academic questions surround the concept of representing marginalized people, including whether the unrepresented or underrepresented can be represented at all, and if they can, then how should they be represented? Summarizing some of Gayatri Spivak’s analyses in the Introduction to his *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory*, theorist John Beverley

notes that the subaltern—generally, a term describing liminal or marginalized person—“cannot be represented adequately by academic knowledge because academic knowledge is a practice that actively produced subalternity .... How can one claim to represent the subaltern, then, when that knowledge is itself involved in the ‘othering’ of the subaltern” (Beverley 1)? Spivak and Beverley raise a valid question. When seeking in an academic manner to represent people whose social points of reference fall outside of the realm of academia, when academics, who (it is assumed) are not subaltern but by virtue of their presence in the academy occupy a privileged space, seek to articulate the experiences and voices of the liminal (for those voices aren’t allowed in the ivory halls), how can this mediated voice be authentic?

In the West, there is indeed a gap between theories of the marginalized—especially blacks—and the lived experiences of these same folk. This ultimately reveals itself in the inability of central official spaces of knowledge to adequately incorporate the theoretical perspectives emerging in marginalized communities. From this comes the conundrum about the subaltern lacking “speech” in the Orthodox sense. The marginalized person’s identity and theoretical practices become, as Toni Morrison has put it, discredited, especially where its points of reference are in conflict with those of the Orthodoxy.

In her essay about the development of the ideas of gender dynamics within the black family, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers reminds us of the many ways in which black people in the West have been misrepresented. Her analysis of the now-infamous Moynihan Report (which asserted the

black family as pathological, as having been “forced” into a [backwards] matriarchal structure<sup>18</sup>) acknowledges the report as an example of Orthodox approaches to blackness; however, she cautions,

"The Moynihan Report" is by no means unprecedented in its conclusions; it belongs, rather, to a class of symbolic paradigms that 1) inscribe "ethnicity" as a scene of negation and 2) confirm the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements. In that regard, the "Report" pursues a behavioral rule of public documentary (66).

The "class of symbolic paradigms" to which Spillers refers are a class of ideas that fall in line with Orthodox approaches to representing marginalized people. For the purposes of this argument, we are concerned most centrally with the inscription of ethnicity as a scene of negation. When blacks have historically been represented in the Orthodox spaces of the West, they have, by virtue of their blackness, their symbolic tie to the concept of Chaos, been ontologically negated.

What might be termed the relativity of empiricism—the notion that there exists within an episteme a set of rules that govern the boundaries of our observation (i.e. which questions we consider scientific, which questions we deem important to ask, what constitutes “evidence” or “proof”)—plays a dominant role in determining the nature of the space between the common and the academic, between the dominant and the subverted, and between any variety of these. In other words, what the Orthodoxy considers valid information is often what is expressed through its official spaces, while

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<sup>18</sup> See Spillers p. 65.

the marginalized perspective is diminished to ostensibly less official (but not less valid) folk spaces. The thrust of Gayatri Spivak's argument about the subaltern resonates here, because the official spaces of knowledge production have played an active role in legitimizing the cultural mores perpetuated through wider and more popular means. Academia's access to information and training, history and broad acceptance as repository of "truth"—no matter which side one finds oneself on—give it a peculiar advantage over the average folk in officially defining the racial codes of the day.

When academics align themselves with the Orthodoxy, the results can be stultifying to the progress of understanding the real experiences of marginalized people. From this alignment comes work like the Moynihan Report, or Hernstein and Murray's *Bell Curve*, which reinforces already dominant and pervasive notions about black intellectual inferiority under the guise of disinterested academic inquiry; or Wilson's *Declining Significance of Race*, which, intentionally or not, serves fodder to the pundits who argued against government assistance for people of color in the form of Affirmative Action by arguing that race was less of an impediment to progress than class.<sup>19</sup> By drawing attention to these studies I make no claim about the validity of the sciences with which these questions are pursued. Rather, I make the argument that their success as studies depended largely upon Western culture's preoccupation with whether or not blacks are intellectually inferior by nature for the former, and with whether or not state-guaranteed access should continue to be supplied to people of color for the latter. Both studies acted as reinforcements of the American psyche, functioning in very much the same way as the initial racial codes did: to exonerate those complicit and in power from

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<sup>19</sup> See Hwang, et al p. 68.



the weight of their complicity in a system of oppression. And, especially in the case of Hernstein and Murray's work, there remained the undertones of the scientific racism that was used by pro-slavery advocates in the nineteenth century to argue for the innate inferiority of black people. As this illustrates, the human sciences are yet tenuous enough to elicit a valid distrust from those spaces where they are seen as mere smoke screens for the same mentalities that have oppressed marginalized people since their inception. Thus, it is for reasons such as these that it becomes difficult to shift the mentalities about—and thus the life situations for—the marginalized, solely from the position of the Orthodox academy.

One of the major purposes behind the push for Black Studies and Women's Studies and the other so-called New Studies of the late 1960s was to amend these gaps in representation so that the lives of marginalized people could be improved. In order to more fully understand and articulate the human experience and through this to make the world more open for marginalized people, the doors closed to the academic legitimization of marginalized experience had to be opened. The logic and grammar of the common people would have to be legitimized in order for their experiences to be legitimized. In other words, to ask if the subaltern can speak in terms of the orthodoxy is a moot point: the orthodoxy itself would have to shift in order for the subaltern's perspective to be legitimized. And perhaps this is the point Spivak was making. But to even have had to pose this question gestures to the fact that certainly at the time of Spivak's essay (and even today) the academic Orthodoxy still accepts an approach to representing the liminal folk experiences that somehow still manages to avoid legitimizing the logic and grammar

of the folk themselves.

The debate about black representation in America is rooted in the wider “Negro Problem” debates that characterized the decades following emancipation, when the entire nation had to reckon with the question of what to do with the millions of blacks who had once labored without compensation, as property, and who now were seeking the full rights of citizenship. For the major race leaders of the earliest decades of the twentieth century, Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, the question centered on the essential nature of the black person. Were Western blacks, as Garvey argued, a great and mighty race, destined to rule an empire based in Africa? Were they, as Washington (Garvey’s greatest inspiration) argued, a lowly people who should methodically work themselves up through the ranks of society, learning skills and trades so that eventually they might achieve a level of citizenship equal to that of whites? Or were they, as Du Bois initially argued (for he would change his beliefs over time) a people composed of a variety of elements, whose best way out of the crippling bondage they experienced post-emancipation was the enlightened leadership of the cream of their collected crop, an intelligentsia focused on uplifting the race? I have simplified, and given a broad sweep. The major philosophies regarding how (and, really, if) blacks should be represented within the epistemology of the West spanned decades, and often overlapped one another. They agreed as often as they contradicted, and certainly in the case of Du Bois—whose perspectives shifted several times during his extraordinarily long career—they even contradicted themselves. But what is essential to an understanding of the development of the question of black representation in the 20<sup>th</sup>

century and beyond is that its implications went beyond the literary and social to the ontological, to a question of who and what a black person is. This question, to which Wynter alludes in her discussion of the rise of New Studies in the 1960s, was a major impetus for the restructuring of the answer to the first defining questions of humanity itself in the West. For if a black person's emerging perspectives and authentic voice were part of the (Enlightenment-era defined) human experience—an experience at whose outset blacks were posited as antithetical—then the true articulation of the black experience would alter our understanding of the human experience itself. And this, while exciting, is also chaotic.

One implication that can be drawn from this observation might help to explain why so many contemporary Orthodox minds adamantly oppose the engagement of honest discourse on the ways in which race still affects us. Within the epistemology of Orthodox identity, to embrace the racialized Other would be to embrace Chaos. Because the socially and academically Orthodox perspective is concerned with the ways in which certain changes in the status quo would disrupt the equilibrium of the current and traditional (racial) order, it is no surprise that the contemporary academically Orthodox voice parallels much so-called racist discourse in its explicit elevation of the “personal” and individual over that of the group, while rather ironically conflating the idea of the majority with the desired Order of the norm. One of the greatest factors working against a change in racist ideology in official spaces is the safety of what's known, and the fear of the unknown, which manifests as potential Chaos.

Thankfully, theoretical practice is not limited to the academy. As bell hooks suggests in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, the process of wondering about how we know what we know, of “deconstructing” (to use a theory-laden term) is quite natural, and can even be found among children. In fact, we have to unlearn theoretical curiosity as we are educated into accepting practices (and identities) as “routine” (hooks 59). And if critical/theoretical questioning is a natural process, then critical/theoretical work is likely to be done, at least informally, in a variety of spaces. Thus, there exists no community of human beings devoid of what could be classified as critical theorizing—deep questions about the society, the self, the world, and the universe. Therefore, it is not for lack of marginalized theorizing that the marginalized have been misrepresented in the Orthodox official spaces. As Barbara Christian, in her essay, “The Race For Theory,” asserts,

...[P]eople of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity (52)?

This being true, today's great liminal theorists are found at least as often in the streets as in the ivory halls. By liminal theorist, I mean this in the same sense in which Terry Eagleton defines the "intellectual": "Indeed, a snap definition of intellectuals might be that they are the opposite of academics ...What academic label, for example, could be pinned on writers like Raymond Williams, Susan Sontag, Jurgen Habermas, Julia Kristeva or Michel Foucault" (81)? The liminal theorist, when applied to the artists I will describe, is a term that takes into account all of their inarticulability, the mysterious draw and truths they express devoid of—but not unvaluable to—traditionally academic sources. As Toni Morrison has put it, these street theorists are possessors of knowledge that, in the Orthodoxy, has been "discredited" ("Rootedness" 61). These theorists, whose work is explicitly representative, are artists whose work utilizes not only the grammar and language of the folk, but also a method of analysis that undercuts the validity of academic grammar—at least in the minds of many whose socioeconomic and racial status keep their relative numbers in academia few—again and again. While their identity as voices of marginalized (and problematic) people and perspectives inevitably leads to condemnation, both by Orthodox spaces and in many cases by marginalized people sympathetic to the order of the norm, many contemporary oral artists, among them notably the hip-hop and rap artists, stand as clear examples of an alternative approach to representation that remains today often under-examined and misunderstood.

Contemporary oral artists such as these utilize arguments that are as complex and as valid as those found in any academic critical or theoretical work but are imbued with much wider accessibility to the folk. In this way, it would appear that "officially"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> That is, legitimated by the academy, published in peer-reviewed journals through a university press.

critical work is often valuable primarily as a one-way language of translation from the grammar of the common folk to the grammar of the academic, and then as well (sometimes) as a translation between critical spaces, but rarely as a means of translating from the academic space to the space of the non-academic common folk. This one-way nature of “officially” critical work in fact limits its value to the development of a common human spirit between folk and academia. Indeed, popular art (partly because of the high level of commodification and technologically widespread nature of the popular world in contemporary times) would hold greater potential for affecting, and effecting, the consciousness of a wide range and large number of people than official critical discourse. The fact that children in any dispossessed space in the world can sing the lyrics to the most popular of songs—even before they have reflected upon exactly what the lyrics mean to them—is a testament to the ubiquity of popular art forms. That what makes it to widespread popularity in popular songs is often received as, at best, innocuous, at worst nefarious<sup>22</sup> to the lives of those same sociopolitically and economically dispossessed people, is a testament to the commodified capitalist nature of the contemporary age. That the songs themselves, whether popular or not, keep being sung, is perhaps a testament to the epistemic nature and ontological weight of the creative act, and to the enduring legacy of its power.

Like Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Fela Kuti, and many other artists whose work focused on a spiritual and social liberation from the postmodern world, contemporary

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<sup>22</sup> Consider the proliferation of meaninglessness in popular culture. Most popular representations of black people in contemporary American postmodern culture tend toward the caricature. Due to the Orthodoxy’s insistence upon images of black people that serve only to entertain, and not to liberate, these representations are, if ignored, perhaps innocuous, but if engaged with, quite poisonous to the development of a healthy ontology for black people.

artists of marginalized identity appeal to trans-epistemic points of reference to cope with and ultimately transcend the oppression inherent in the postmodern Western episteme. Whether the appeal be to God or the Divine (as is the case with many “conscious” rappers and performers like Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Erykah Badu and others), or to a sardonic-yet-honest approach to postmodern life that exposes the pathology of the system itself, even where it seems complicit, as is the case with rappers such as Lil Wayne, Rick Ross or Jay-Z, or, even, to a postmodern artificiality so absurd that it gestures, even against its own will, to the desperation and absurdity of the Postmodern, as is the case with a performer like Nicki Minaj—appeals to modes whose potential to claw at the founding white supremacist Orthodoxy of the West are numerous among liminal popular artists today.

In the past century, there have been few, if any, black American artists more exemplary of the marginalized voice in its conflict with the Orthodox modes of being than rapper Tupac Shakur. The son of a former Black Panther, Shakur rose to fame expressing his explicit purpose to be a representative for the unheard and dispossessed masses of black people who struggled to survive under American hegemony. Not content with merely being a multiplatinum-selling rapper and acclaimed actor, Tupac strove to be an activist for a segment of the American community for which few others since Malcolm X have ever even bothered to speak; more importantly, like Malcolm, he sought to demystify the logic that validates on the Orthodox level the very same mentalities which on the marginalized level it would condemn. World famous, eloquent, and unapologetically black, Tupac Shakur possessed a confluence of identity traits that many

in power saw as absolutely dangerous. He told the stories of the people who lived in the hood, encouraging people brutalized by the police to be violent in return, celebrating drug and alcohol use, and emanating a philosophy that humanized groups of people Orthodox culture saw as nuisances to order. In short, until his death at 25 in 1996, he was the living symbol of Chaos in America (Lazin; Spierer).

Shakur sought to articulate a code of identity for the black man in the streets. Dubbed Thug Life,<sup>23</sup> the movement Shakur attempted to institute was philosophically similar to the founding principles of the Black Panther Party in that it dictated respect for education, a spirit of racial uplift, black consciousness and political power. Thug Life was ingenious in that it utilized a very popular art form (his 1995 album, *All Eyez on Me*, sold nine million copies) to promote a strategy of vigorous self-definition that was unapologetically counter-hegemonic and undeniably powerful. Of course, its effectiveness as a perceived dangerous ideology could be measured in the extent to which, despite Shakur's commercial success, official spaces sought to silence Shakur's messages. Activist C. Dolores Tucker and Presidential candidate Bob Dole, among others, led spirited attacks against Tupac and other so-called "gangster rappers," portraying the violence depicted in their lyrics as glorification, and spearheading the now-commonplace indictment of rap music as fundamentally misogynistic.

While these were (and are) valid critiques of rap music in general, these shortcomings were far from defining features of Shakur's work. His depiction of street violence was critique and honest representation, not glorification. As the Code of Thug

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<sup>23</sup> Or, T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E., an acronym standing for "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone." (See Spierer or <[www.thuglifearmy.com](http://www.thuglifearmy.com)>).



Life<sup>24</sup> shows, Shakur's awareness of the detrimental effects of street violence on black communities was acute, and in the spirit of the Black Panthers from which his mother came, he sought to eradicate drugs and violence within the black community. He represented street violence in his music in an attempt to draw attention to it, and, his work taken as a whole, his philosophy was not one of senseless or misguided violence, but one of black preservation and self defense. It is within this framework that the generalizations about his attitudes towards women must be taken as well. Certainly, few contemporary marginalized voices would agree that Tupac was indicative of rap music's misogynistic trend. If anyone represented the opposite of this, it would be Shakur. With songs like "Brenda's Got a Baby," "Keep Ya Head Up," and "Dear Mama," Shakur emerged as one of the few major stars willing to deal with the gender issues within the black community.

In "Brenda's Got a Baby,"<sup>25</sup> Shakur tells the harrowing story of a young woman who, as a result of rape, conceives a child from her stepfather. Drawing attention to the limited and paradoxical choices for young black women in poverty, Shakur weaves the narrative to its tragic end—"Prostitute found slain / And Brenda's her name / She's got a baby..."<sup>26</sup> In "Keep Ya Head Up," off his 1993 album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.S.*,<sup>27</sup> Shakur encourages black women—especially single mothers in ghettos—to transcend the misogynistic threat: "And when he tells you you ain't nothing don't believe him / and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> From his 1991 album, *Tupacalypse Now*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Another acronym Shakur coined, standing for "Never Ignorant, Getting Goals Accomplished" (See Spierer).

if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him / Cause, sister you don't need him."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, in "Dear Mama," Shakur provides one of the most heartfelt and thoughtful appreciations of black parenthood in the black arts tradition since Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays." Written for his mother, Shakur explicates the psychological conflict of having been born to a Black Panther mother, who later in his childhood became addicted to drugs. His expressions of transcendent love and devotion for one who the Orthodox mode would have completely dismissed are a testament to his brilliance. "And even as a crack fiend, Mama / you always was a black queen, Mama / I finally understand / for a woman it ain't easy, trying to raise a man."<sup>29</sup> To an objective mind, these examples demonstrate that Shakur was not only not-misogynistic, but was in fact one of the few representative voices with both the forum and the capacity and will to articulate for black women in the hood. Shakur rightly exposed the hypocrisy of those who would attempt to mask their general contempt for his essential identity and that of those he claimed to represent with critiques that diminished his valid and revolutionary art form into simply the glorification of street violence and hatred of women (Spirer). The gaps in representation dissolved Shakur's intent into that of the invisible thug black male typical of the embodiment of the symbol of Chaos. As Michael Eric Dyson said in Peter Spirer's 2007 documentary, *Tupac Shakur: Thug Angel*, regarding the East Coast-West Coast rap rivalry to which Tupac Shakur apparently fell victim (but its relevance is doubly effective here), "The distinction between the real and the represented got blurred" (Spirer).

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<sup>28</sup> From his 1993 album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.S.*

<sup>29</sup> From his 1995 album, *Me Against the World*.

Ultimately, these attacks on Shakur also indicate his participation in the long-standing black arts tradition of remaining an enigma to the Orthodox mode. The hegemony feared the power he possessed as a galvanizing spirit for poor black men, and as the self-proclaimed mouthpiece of that generation of men, he capitalized on his enigma, and indeed reveled in it. As he once said in an interview, Thug Life was not a rap group, but rather was “some ol’ deep shit you can’t sink your feet in” (Spirer). The enigma gained even greater dimension after his death in 1996. A tireless worker to the end, Shakur produced so much work that even after he died, he was still releasing albums. In his first posthumous album, *The Don Killuminati: the 7 Day Theory*, which he released under the pseudonym Makaveli, he delves into esotericism and prophecy, foreseeing his own death and calling upon those same dispossessed masses of black people to follow him into the realm of antihegemonic and trans-epistemic mentalities. In “Blasphemy,” he encourages his “thug nation” to “get out of the game,”<sup>30</sup> reminding them of the necessity to transcend the dystopia America had become to its poor, dispossessed blacks. If the tone of *The Don Killuminati* feels dark, it is only because the margins, as the symbols of Chaos within the Western episteme, are themselves represented by the darkness. Furthermore, the dark undertones of *The Don Killuminati* indicate Shakur’s awareness of his position as heretic to the Orthodox mode of the West at the end of the twentieth century.

The legacy of Tupac Shakur is important because it sheds light onto the internal perspectives of those whose identities have been so clearly represented in Western culture as the symbol of Chaos—black thugs and gang members. Until these perspectives are

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<sup>30</sup> An expression meaning, essentially, to cease drug dealing, and the black-on-black violence that follows from it.

known, the ease with which these identities can be dismissed will only be matched in intensity by the frequency of moments of radical rupture at the margins of orthodox culture. Until then, they will reside in a state of invisibility characteristic of the black experience, a state of invisibility that, as Lewis Gordon has noted, “involves a form of hypervisibility:”

The black is, in other words, invisible by virtue of being seen. Being seen is, however, ambiguous here. It means an act of reducing a feature of reality to absolute reality—of ontologizing that which is not ontological. In effect, it means to render something present through making something absent (88).

Gordon argues that invisibility occurs as a result of the processes that ontologize blackness. It is, then, this ontological quality of blackness which renders the black subject invisible. This is true of any trait. But the especially brutal legacy of color in the West lends this particular trait greater significance. Blackness implicates itself as a phenomenon that is not merely social or political, but also ontological. The result of this is that there exists a net change in the ontology of the Western subject when that Western subject takes on the identity of blackness. And the question of representation then becomes not merely one of media and social culture, but one of ontology—the very purpose to which the prophetic artist dedicates his life.

In the following chapter, we will examine spoken word, one art form that bears a major potential for prophetic tradition. As the West accelerates towards newer and more meaningless forms of postmodernity, there exists among marginalized artists creating

today a great potential for bringing about a change in the epistemic Orthodox limitations on marginalized identity in the present and beyond.

## Chapter IV: Prophetic Folk Voices

[I]t is only the discipline of literary scholarship, whose normalizing role is ordered by this very schema, that possesses the rhetorical *techne*, inherited from the founding heresy of the *Studia* as well as from the long practice of working with *the figurative logic of poetry and fiction*, not only to take our governing modes of figuration and their feats of "semantic engineering" (Maranda, 1980) as the objects of inquiry, but also to reveal the laws of human behavior as that behavior is ordered by projected verbal-rhetorical schemas: the laws of human systems, whose structuring Order/Chaos oppositions are the human version of what Dawkins calls the universally applicable replicator units or systemic codes (Dawkins, 1983) which everywhere function to absolutize the modes of our always rhetorical "natures"; the natures whose bonding *topoi* determine how we think about Self/World (Wynter 48; my italics).

Proclamations of marginalized identities undoubtedly attract slam audiences, who may see poetry slams not only as literary or performative but ultimately as political events. With [Maria] Damon's observations

about authenticity in mind, it seems pertinent to ask why marginalized identity, and particularly black identity, is so often awarded the badge of authenticity at poetry slams (Somers-Willett 72).

When Taalam said, “This, the most sacred art,”

What I heard was, “Spoken word is the art

Of getting to know God for a living.” -13 of Nazareth<sup>31</sup>

For marginalized people, life in the contemporary West still poses the necessity for self-definition. Hip hop, while once a great success for the possibility of marginalized voices to articulate in their own grammar the terms of their own definition, has of late taken a turn towards the oversimplified and vacant, the nihilistic or the super-materialistic—likely a symptom of its incorporation into the postmodern Orthodoxy. While still an anti-establishment art form in its “conscious” spaces, black music has become deeply intertwined with market impulses. Unlike in the era of Tupac Shakur, today it seems that if a hit rap record is anti-hegemonic, it is difficult to determine if the record was an expression of a true revolutionary impulse, or an expression of whatever happened to be trending with the paying public at the time.

Television is no better. With negligible ownership of media outlets by people of color, racially marginalized people have relatively few mass media outlets from which their voices can be heard at all. Take into account the tendency of these few outlets to be

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<sup>31</sup> See his official website, <[www.13ofnazareth.webs.com](http://www.13ofnazareth.webs.com)>.

pro-Orthodoxy, and the number of legitimate spaces for anti-hegemonic articulation by people of marginalized identity slips perilously close to nil. Lacking legitimate spaces from which to speak, the marginalized person would be defined from without by Orthodox ideas—which, as we have seen, serve only to the advantage of the Orthodoxy. With problems of representation like these rampant in mass culture, the marginalized are often met with an apparent choice between caricature and statistic, between the externally defined, ontologically debilitating representations of pop culture, and the woefully inadequate but statistically sound representations of the traditional spaces of knowledge.

It is from this tension that the avant-garde art form known as spoken word<sup>32</sup> emerges. In the contemporary postmodern West, spoken word remains one of the few blossoming art forms that grant a forum for the self-defining marginalized voice while still evading the intellectual death often accompanying postmodern mainstream commodification.<sup>33</sup> Through the increased interest made possible by its dissemination through networks like HBO and CNN, and, more often, through traditional, grassroots methods like open mics and local poetry slams, spoken word has managed to retain its identity as an art form where ideas and messages contrary to the Orthodox can be

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<sup>32</sup> In essence, spoken word is the performance of poetry before a live audience. Normally, the performer of the poem is also its author. Pieces are generally, but not always, memorized. While it can be done anywhere, it is most often done in spaces where common folk congregate, from coffee shops, bars and lounges to museums, parks and classrooms. Wherever a group can be gathered together and a word can be shared, spoken word is at home. In this way, it is an essentially populous art form, because it is available to anyone with a voice.

<sup>33</sup> Spoken word has not been immune to corporate influence. Especially in its competitive slam form, it has in recent years become a space upon which the commoditizing corporate structures so prevalent in the postmodern West have shown some focus. The NCAA, Sprite, HBO, CNN, BET and Def Jam Records are just a few of the examples of recent corporate interest in the art form.



expressed freely. People of marginalized identities, many of whom are teenagers or younger, use the art form to critique, analyze, argue and re-define their own identities<sup>34</sup>.

Much of the revolutionary potential of the spoken word art form rests in its linkages to the oral tradition. According to Yaw Owosu-Frempong, oral artistry has traditionally served three purposes: “entertainment, education, and ritual” (736). The spoken word art form is indicative of all three purposes, and it is through these three age-old purposes that the liberating potential of the art form is achieved. In every corner of the United States—indeed, everywhere in the world—orality remains a most powerful and immediate form of communication. Through speech, ideas are conveyed with such swiftness and with such dimension of meaning, and with, simultaneously, such simplicity, that in eons of development, it has yet to become obsolete. Thus, an art form rooted in the oral speech act—especially one as old as poetry for performance—is as natural and as human as speech itself. Using the dialects of the people with whom one is accustomed, the spoken word artist instantaneously creates a connection with her community, a connection that replicates itself as soon as someone who hears it decides that he too will undertake this act. It is an art form that belongs not to corporations or institutions, but to everyone who has a voice. Its elevation of marginality is a testament to its essential populous nature. By focusing on the voices the Orthodox culture stifles/denies/stereotypes, spoken word poetry acts as cultural critique—and its nature as an art form that still bears the mark of the sacred reveals its identity as ceremonial in nature, rather than simply entertaining. This is not to say that there aren’t a great many

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<sup>34</sup> For more information on commodification of spoken word or the potential of youth poetry, readers may want to visit <[www.poetryslam.com](http://www.poetryslam.com)>, <[www.bravenewvoices.org](http://www.bravenewvoices.org)>, and <[www.hbo.com](http://www.hbo.com)>.

poets who see in the art form a certain potential for recognition, that there aren't those with pro-hegemonic intentions. Rather, I wish to put forth the idea that the spirit of the art form itself bears potential because it can be utilized by all—not limited to but certainly including those who seek a restructuring of the epistemic boundaries of our world. There are a great many spoken word artists whose work exhibits a fundamental desire to get listeners to call into question the cultivated blindness and casual racism of the Orthodox Western episteme.

Furthermore, spoken word bears great potential because it is indicative of a most important aspect of marginalized survival—the appeal to transcendence. “What if this is God’s work?” New Jersey-based poet Taalam Acey asks about spoken word in one of his now classic poems, a poem about the role and duty of the spoken word artist in the contemporary world. A prolific spoken word poet, Acey has published more than a dozen spoken word albums and has authored four books, has appeared on BET and TVOne, and has garnered the praise of such respected artists as Stevie Wonder, Marc Smith and Gil-Scott Heron<sup>36</sup>. An artist-activist whose work is exemplary of the hegemony-challenging potential of the spoken word art form, Acey’s poems are delivered, whether live or recorded over music<sup>37</sup>, with the explicit intent to educate and to inspire the sociopolitically marginalized population. Nearly every poem is posed either as strike against hegemony, or as an investigation of the lives of people who have been marginalized.

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<sup>36</sup> See <[www.TaalamAcey.com](http://www.TaalamAcey.com)>.

<sup>37</sup> Many poets release albums where their live work is performed to music. Distinct from rap, however, these musical combinations are often not as confined to the beat as rap music is, and the product is undeniably spoken word.

Acey's poem, "Market 4 Ni\$\$as" (Market for Niggas) is a searing critique of the commoditized hip-hop industry, and an argument for the revolutionary potential of the spoken word art form. About the rappers who sign major contracts with labels, he admonishes: "a million dollars is a small price to pay for his dignity." Later in the poem, he illustrates the poisonous effects of the capitalist disregard for the representations put out about black people:

There's money to be made in convincing black girls  
Jill Scott doesn't exist  
Cause as long as a black girl knows she's golden,  
she won't allow herself to be called no bitch<sup>38</sup>

Exposing the aforementioned market focus in black music, Acey points out that for white-owned media corporations, there is a monetary gain in keeping Jill Scott, a conscious, neo-soul artist whose messages are empowering to young black women, away from a mainstream success similar to that of other young black artists who have gotten more famous on negative messages. Because the buying public is primarily white, the most sought-after images of black people are not those which empower black people, but those that entertain whites. About contemporary pop rappers, Acey laments: "the more he shows his draw's, the more he gets applause."<sup>39</sup> This commentary is important not only because it is true, but also because it is directly accessible in the common folks spaces where spoken word artists perform. His allusions to popular culture resonate with not only the common young black American person, but young people across the board. If the counterhegemonic act is to be articulated, the people who suffer (sometimes

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<sup>38</sup> See <[www.TaalamAcey.com](http://www.TaalamAcey.com)>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

unconsciously) under the influence of Western psychological hegemony must be met where they are. Acey and other spoken word artists are uniquely equipped to do just that.

Acey's poems are indicative of the visionary strength and critical potential of the spoken word art form. His success as a performer has not changed his message—indeed his success likely depends on his message resonating with a segment of the population whose life experiences are not treated seriously enough by other popular art forms—a segment slowly awakening to an art form capable of articulating the sociopolitical and ontological aspects of their lives, in terms to which they can relate.

New Orleans poet Sunni Patterson rose to worldwide fame after Hurricane Katrina, where her peaceful, almost holy presence stood out among the voices of the fallen. Her capacity to articulate not only the suffering, but also the resilience and trans-epistemic power of the people of African descent is singular among artists of any sort today. Also very successful as a spoken word artist, Patterson has been featured on HBO's *Def Poetry* and has performed with Black Arts Movement legends Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and more. Not only a poet, Sunni is also trained in eastern medicine,<sup>40</sup> and when performing or making appearances, is often surrounded by people who treat her as a folk guru—a role she plays not only in her practice of medicine, but in the way in which she performs poetry. As a figure in spoken word, Sunni Patterson embodies the spirituality of the art form, and perhaps better than anyone, is exemplary of the link between the spoken word art form and the African oral tradition, where the Word is conceived as holy. It is in this spirit from which many of her New Orleans compatriots entrust her to articulate their feelings. In “We Know This Place,” she combines

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<sup>40</sup> See her official website, <[www.sunnipatterson.com](http://www.sunnipatterson.com)>.

awareness of the spirit world with the voice of the exiled souls of New Orleans, many of whom died betrayed by their government:

And we know this place  
For we have seen more times than we'd like to imagine  
bloated cadavers  
floating through waters  
of a city gone savage  
foraging the land for what can be salvaged  
but what can be saved  
when all is lost?"<sup>41</sup>

This passage indicates the power of spoken word to be a living document, an oral history. In traditional West African societies, orality formed a fundamental basis upon which cultures were built (Owusu-Frempong 738, 748; Wharry 203-4). The oral tradition in such communities was rich, dynamic, and timeless. Storytellers, poets, political and religious figures were all important members of traditional West African societies whose operative mode of communication was oral in nature. In so-called nonliterate/preliterate African societies, the oral tradition (in addition to visual/pictorial modes of representation) formed the basis for the retention of cultural history and was one major means of constructing and tending to identity. Through recitation, Patterson, in the tradition of her ancestors, keeps the stories of New Orleans alive so that we might learn from what the dead have to teach, even from beyond the grave.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

In her poem, “We Made It,” Patterson weaves descriptions of destitution only to raise the spirits of the survivors with the awareness that survival is itself a divine virtue: “I’m from a stock that pitched cocktail bombs and hand grenades / We pour cayenne pepper around the perimeter of a building to keep the police dogs at bay,”<sup>42</sup> she fairly beams. As she extends her litany into the horrifying images of Katrina and meditations on death, she consolidates an anti-hegemonic solidarity that transcends space and time, conjuring up images of the assassination of MLK and Malcolm X, the death of Emmitt Till and the auction block, juxtaposing it with equally detrimental images of hip hop music, then seamlessly moving from a description of psychosocial weaponry to modes of trans-epistemic, scriptural liberation:

Bend over, touch your toes  
Show your teeth, lift her titties, examine his balls  
Now this damn near sounds like a hip hop song  
But it’s slavery at its peak  
A circus for all the freaks  
They’ll warn you, ‘Caution when you speak,’  
Can’t afford the truth to leak  
But we’ll say, ‘Blessed are the meek,  
And all the ones who make peace,  
And all the ones who are persecuted  
for the sake of righteousness  
For theirs is the kingdom,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Earth is their inheritance.’<sup>43</sup>

Like Acey, Patterson bridges the idea of liberation with a critique of what is popularly represented as black marginalized youth culture—hip hop music. Also like Acey, Patterson extends an appeal to the trans-epistemic and holy, quoting biblical scripture and through this conjuring the prophetic tradition of which she is absolutely a part. Furthermore, her critique of popular commoditized representations and actions, like that of Talaam Acey, 13 of Nazareth and many, many others, indicates that the folk theorist is very much alive and well among contemporary performance poets of marginalized identity.

Virginia-based poet 13 of Nazareth’s<sup>44</sup> poetry is often a poignant critique of the ways in which spirituality and sociopolitics intersect to form oppressive states of being. In his poem “Sighs and Symbols,” which begins with the foreword, “For those who believe in the words inspired by God / more than they believe in God,” he draws attention to the ways in which the Western episteme has limited the growth of marginalized people (and thus its own growth) by claiming a monopoly on spiritual truth. Highlighting the ways in which the racial and spiritual have been conflated, and, furthermore, the similar ways in which the hierarchy of racial and spiritual difference has been implemented, 13 implores his listener to consider that the actual nature of the spirit tends toward unification, rather than difference.

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<sup>43</sup> See *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry 42* at <[www.hbo.com](http://www.hbo.com)>.

<sup>44</sup> See his official website, <[www.13ofnazareth.webs.com](http://www.13ofnazareth.webs.com)>.

From this point, he demonstrates a clear distinction between spiritual words and earthly actions, and draws attention to the hypocrisy that arises when this distinction is ignored. With a rapid-fire delivery reminiscent, perhaps, of a corner preacher, he asserts:

The difference between heaven and earth  
is the difference between what we pray  
and what we live.

I mean, I can pray for peace,  
but if all my actions facilitate beef

I am the un-answer to all of my prayers.<sup>45</sup>

Like a master teacher, he illuminates the contrast further, in the grammar of the young and common folk at which his ministry is aimed: “It’s like the woman who claims to hate game, but she be on players—basketball, football, grinding like the Clipse<sup>46</sup>...”<sup>13</sup> focuses on the paradoxes inherent in the dogma of everyday life in order to lead his listeners to a state of higher spiritual consciousness. Like that of Sunni Patterson, 13 of Nazareth’s poetry is influenced by Eastern transcendental spiritual and prophetic thought. Positioning himself as a voice for the marginalized not only in the West but throughout the world in “Sighs and Symbols,”<sup>13</sup> concludes the piece demonstrating the Orthodoxy’s hypocrisy in its demonization of Tupac Shakur’s “Thug Life” mantra:

my country  
tis of the illusion  
sweet land of delusion

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> A pun. The Clipse is a rap group out of Virginia, the most successful single of whom was a song called, “Grindin’.”



for thee they bling  
its all about Americo Vespucci's dream in the Christ  
or for Columbus  
and the holy breath descends in dove form  
like colonizers hitting the shores in thug form  
screaming "thug life"  
400 years before tupacalypse now<sup>47</sup>

Clear in its intent both to educate and to *inspire* (in the original sense<sup>48</sup>), "Sighs and Symbols" is indicative of spoken word's potential to bring to light the complex ideas religion and society examine without the veil held between performer and the audience.

In another piece, "Stability in Motion," 13 of Nazareth draws attention to the trans-epistemic value of his art form by calling spoken word, "the art of getting to know God for a living." Utilizing parallels to the life of Jesus Christ, in this poem 13 argues that the prophetic nature of spoken word is manifest, though, like the prophets who came before, spoken word artists of today may be doomed to suffer for their prophetic natures. But, he warns, do not be destroyed by this. He reinforces this idea with the question: "How you believe in God scared of creations that live in submission to divine will?" The suggestion is that if one is a prophetic believer in something that can transcend the physical, then to base one's excuses for not living a life one feels to be right on the physical is counterintuitive. This message serves at least a dual purpose: for the poet, it is a message of encouragement and a call to renew one's faith where it may have shaken

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<sup>47</sup> See <<http://13ofnazareth.bandcamp.com/album/lovelutionary-th-xprntl-gd-spl>>.

<sup>48</sup> The term "inspire" according to the New Oxford American Dictionary, derives from the Latin *inspirare*, which means to 'breathe into,' a sense originally attributed to the divine.

under the pressure of this world; and for the audience, it is didactic, explaining the role of the prophetic poet, while illustrating that he himself has a message worthy not only of being heard, but of being engaged.

Beyond mere words of encouragement, these poems, like Tupac Shakur's songs, are forms of critique and theorizing that utilize the grammar and points of reference of common, marginalized people to critically engage the world. Many spoken word artists do work that has revolutionary potential—potential that is often overlooked or dismissed due not only to the common grammar (and thus the apparent simplicity) of the art form, but also (and especially) to the mouths and experiences out of which these works come. To be a marginalized person is to be already primed for dismissal—this is the nature of marginalization and liminality.

This marginalization is present even within the performance poetry community. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett's 2009 study, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, until now the only officially academic work on the art form of spoken word, exemplifies the way in which Orthodox philosophy diminishes marginalized identity. It examines slam poetry, the competitive arm of the international spoken word poetry community. Arguing that within the realm of slam poetry—and especially in the National Poetry Slam (NPS), governed by Poetry Slam, Incorporated (PSi)<sup>49</sup>—there exists a bias towards marginalized identities, Somers-Willett notes that this predisposition is antithetical to the true anti-hegemonic revelation characteristic of New Studies and identity politicians of the present. Furthermore, she argues that the greatest bias actually exists towards poets who perform peculiarly black

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<sup>49</sup> See <[www.poetryslam.com](http://www.poetryslam.com)>.

identities in their poems. “More often than not,” she states, “marginalized gender, sexual, and racial identities are celebrated at poetry slams, and performances of African American identities are especially rewarded”:

The National Poetry Slam community itself is overtly concerned with the expression of racial, gender, and sexual difference in its ranks. For over a decade at the NPS, readings specifically showcasing Asian American, African American, Native American, Latino, female, and queer poets have been held in addition to the regular bouts. Most recently, self-proclaimed “nerds” have also claimed their place in slam’s smorgasbord of marginalized identities [...] This, it should be noted, is the one NPS-designated event in which straight white men claim a marginalized identity. (Somers-Willett 71)

As a result of this supposed bias, Somers-Willett argues, black poets must “perform” a blackness in their poems that is less about articulating their racialized experiences for poetic expression and cultural gain than about the reward of performing well in competition. Because judges reward apparently “authentic” blackness with higher scores, which lead to prize money, recognition, and the possibility of the aforementioned corporate sponsorship, she argues that many black poets play to this idea of authenticity by filling their poems with signifiers of “blackness,”—signifiers that are only bolstered in their “authenticity” by the performers’ black skin.

*Cultural Politics* is a perfect example of the way in which Orthodox theoretical approaches seek to undermine the ceremonial act that would expose the innate failures of

hegemony. Arguing that slam poetry is often erroneously thought to have originated at the Nuyorican Poets' Café in New York, a space that "began as a safe space for urban Puerto Rican underclass poets and now is home to a number of urban African American poets of many classes working in the hip-hop idiom," when in reality, the poetry slam sprang out of a white, middle-class suburb in Chicago, the brainchild of a white heterosexual male, Marc Smith (97). Failing to investigate why it may be that so many might believe that slam poetry originated with black culture, Somers-Willett leaps to the suggestion that this apparent misappropriation comes from a crediting of such oral-based performance to a falsely "authentic," rather than a *performed*, black culture. However, while it is true that the P*S*i slam format<sup>50</sup>—characterized by five randomly selected judges who score on a ten-point scale, three minute time limits for poems, and the specifics of the team format—were in fact invented by Marc Smith circa 1984, the concept of oral poetry competitions has manifested numerous times throughout world history, including in ancient Greece, ancient India, and certainly the oral traditions out of which African Americans descended.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, as one of its primary arguments, Somers-Willett's study draws attention to the influence of the blackface minstrel show on the American oral poetic tradition (43-51). Officially believed to have started in 1843, the blackface minstrel show was concerned, as Somers-Willett shows, with performing a certain type of blackness, one that was not "too black," but that marked itself as caricature (Somers-Willett 44-5). Illustrating that the minstrel tradition also included the caricature of other marginalized

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> See Henderson, p. 25; and Ramey, Lauri. "The Theology of the Lyric Tradition in African American Spirituals" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70.2(2002) 347-63.

identities, such as Jews, Italians, Irish and women, she strangely ignores the racist overtones of minstrelsy to argue that the minstrel tradition's "cross-racial exchange and cultural styles enabled a new bohemian literary aesthetic to emerge in the United States whose practitioners include Walt Whitman, Carl Van Vechten, and the Beats" (51).

While it is true that it originally emerged as a comical white approximation of actual black cultural practices, the minstrel show was important not only because it mocked black culture, but also because it was highly influential in shaping the dominant comical narrative of the stereotypical African American in Western culture—a narrative many black spoken word artists reject. Somers-Willett's peculiar argument that the minstrel tradition was one of the founding American traditions for the performance and celebration of marginalized identity, and a precursor to the tradition in which spoken word emerged, is, fundamentally, an attempt to interdict the ceremony in which these marginalized voices are elevated to authorities (51).

Somers-Willett suggests that the typical liberal-minded National Poetry Slam judge is often co-opted into being complicit in a phenomenal ruse, whereby black and other poets of marginalized identities, by virtue of their decision to include certain subject matter in their performances, play upon white guilt for personal—that is, Orthodox, antirevolutionary, hegemonically complicit—gain. More damaging even than this is that the judges, by giving high scores to poems that express marginalized identities when performed by people of color, actually reinforce marginalization. And the culturally specific side events at NPS competitions, with the notable exception of the predominately-white nerd slam, "unconsciously [reify] the positions of whiteness,

straightness, and maleness as the norm, as not worthy of attention, investigation, or showcasing beyond the usual competition” (Somers-Willett 72). In this way, *Cultural Politics* is indicative both of the type of epistemological blindness that so pervades the Western Orthodox episteme, and of the inevitability of its logical failure. While Somers-Willett argues that slam poetry’s exaltation of marginality depends on the tension between the marginal and center, it is actually more accurate to state that slam poetry’s celebration of marginal identities is a symptom of that tension, and indeed the inaugurating impulse of the Ceremony that will validate identities that have been dismissed.

As Terry Eagleton has noted, radicalism is not merely the worship of the state of being marginalized—there are truths inherent in the expression of a marginalized situation (105-7). When a person explores a marginalized identity that can be backed up with historical, sociological, psychological, quantifiable evidence, there is probably more going on in that person’s representation of him or herself as marginalized than a mere appeal to convention. While the radical edge may be a source of exploration for Orthodox identities, a phase to pass through on the way to adulthood, the same cannot be said for marginalized identities. Therefore, to diminish a marginalized person’s actual negative experiences with hegemony by dismissing them offhand as histrionic or opportunist in nature, while a defining act of an Orthodox mentality, is illogical. For while, as Somers-Willett shows, it has been historically possible for a white person to perform blackness (or Irishness, or womanhood), and, at the end of the show to wash off his cork and return to the Orthodox identity, no such indulgences exist for the *actual*

black person—that is, the person whose dark skin color won't wash off with soap.

Therefore, even when a black person performs an identity that may appear to parallel a cultural motif (as in the black poet performing a poem critiquing racism, or a poem about Africa), there should in the scholar's mind emerge at least the possibility that what is happening is more complex than simple mimicry of mimicry, than the “formulaic rage” lacking authentic points of reference of which Somers-Willett accuses black performance poets.<sup>52</sup> That *Cultural Politics* fails to do that is indicative of the pervasiveness of a dismissive approach to marginalized counter-hegemonic perspectives in the West. What poets such as Taalam Acey, Sunni Patterson, and 13 of Nazareth show, to the increasing number of people aware of their work, is that spoken word is an art form in which the marginalized voice can be expressed, and one in which the issues that affect the lives of marginalized people—socially and ontologically—can be interpreted, addressed, theorized about and challenged.

Though I entered the world of spoken word and performance poetry in 2006, my introduction to national-level slams came in 2008. That year, I competed in the Southern Fried Regional Poetry Slam and the National Poetry Slam—at the time, the two largest adult poetry team slams in the world. I performed and scored rather well at both. Predictably, much of my poetry focused on topics that interested me—there was certainly a mention of blackness in many of the poems I performed, and some of the poems were entirely focused on commentary about African heritage and black identity. I was fresh-

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<sup>52</sup> “Declarations of marginalized identity and accompanying invectives against prejudice have become a chestnut at poetry slams, a somewhat “formulaic rage”—to borrow the words of John McWhorter—that audiences have come to expect and appreciate in a form of well-meaning, politically motivated support for marginalized people in American culture.” (Somers-Willett 72)

faced and dreadlocked, well-spoken and perhaps atypical in my delivery and—I am not ashamed to admit—rather academic vocabulary. In some ways, I certainly fit the image about which the Orthodox mode is so critical. I certainly didn't hide my blackness. Neither, however, did I hide my heterosexuality, or my self-assessment as a “nerd.”

As a slam competitor during the weeklong events, I was also witness to many other performers. I heard poems of all sorts. Whenever certain poems scored well, some poet would inevitably decry that the judges tended to score more highly the types of poems that could make them feel certain specified things—generally, pain and anguish, political solidarity, or else they seemed to just want to laugh. Poems about rape, poems about the black situation (called “black power” poems), and other “fight-the-power” type poems were generally those to which the grumbly poets ascribed the badge of judge bias. On the non-competitive side, I have heard the same arguments about erotic poems being an easy way to gain the favor of an audience. Whatever validity there is to the idea that certain topics are more likely to connect with an audience than others, it has been my experience that a judge or audience is more likely to respond positively to a topic that surprises them—or to a well-covered topic approached in a novel manner—than they are to a hackneyed idea done in a hackneyed manner. Furthermore, that audiences respond to poems expressing the perspectives of the marginalized can perhaps more adequately be attributed to there being an actual connection point in these works than merely a meaningless exchange of empty ideals and misguided validation.

When the time came for the competition to end, and I had not won it all, what stood out to me was not the possibility that the judges might have given me better scores



had I performed a black identity a bit better—an idea that strikes many poets, black and white as absurd. What stood out to me is what stands out to me whenever I stand before a crowd and give my best performance, a performance that does not feel like a performance at all, but really, like a letting go, a relinquishing of the self to the moment. What stood out to me was the sense that—beyond the scores the random judges must, with the slightest deliberation, provide—something great had transpired. What stood out to me was a sense that I had made a connection. When a poet stands before an audience and expresses a critique of the culture, and is “rewarded” with positive feedback, that feedback rarely if ever has to do with a sense of guilt on the part of the judges or audience. That feedback is, like the response dynamic of the call-and-response tradition with which blacks in the West are so intimately familiar, confirmation that a connection has been made.

Ultimately, spoken word poetry, whether in noncompetitive form as exemplified by Acey, Patterson and 13 of Nazareth, or in slam form as critiqued by Somers-Willett, celebrates the marginalized voice because it is born from the status of marginalization, an organic outgrowth of the West itself. Because it can spring up wherever people find the space to speak and to share with one another, it is accessible to all, and thus always available to marginalized people in the folk spaces where they often operate. Because it is fundamentally the art of creative speech, it lends itself well to the articulation of theoretical perspectives in the languages and grammars of the marginalized, and falls right in line with a tradition of creative work aimed at ontological liberation.

“There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and *in* it,” Toni Morrison writes in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (56). She is correct. It is to this time that the spoken word art form gestures, this mythical time that is somehow both past and future, when the voices made marginal in other spaces are given a chance to enter into an arena where their identities can be made valid, their perspectives respected, and their growth supported. Everywhere in the nation there are prophetic folk voices rising up in bars and lounges, on college campus open mics and in poetry slams. For today’s world, so full of the confusion of postmodernism, the destruction of hegemony, and the manifestations of socioeconomic decline, gestures to a time when the question, “What are we, really?” will be unavoidable. It will then be the responsibility of the articulators of culture, the creative souls who emerge from circumstances of liminality, to inaugurate the ceremony that will bring the fated answer.

And we are ready.

## Conclusion

Yet in a world in which even the self-correcting process of the natural sciences finds itself threatened by the increasing hegemony of a technoscience which seeks to manipulate the physical processes of nature in order to enhance the military and economic power of some human groups over others, a counter-exertion is called for parallel to that of the Studia's original heresy. The Studia must be reinvented as a higher order of human knowledge, able to provide an "outer view" which takes the human rather than any one of its variations as Subject ("Ceremony" 56).

"The future will be Utopia, or there will be none." –Slavoj Zizek

The fundamental codes of Western culture are primed for a shift. With rising prices, declining resources, global climate change, perpetual war, and the sour taste of disillusionment sweeping the youth, the future has never been less certain, and the past never more inaccessible. As postmodernism and late capitalism grind further into absurdity, the epistemic holes in Western Orthodox culture are brought into relief, and the marginalized identities are finding spaces where new possibilities for identity are

surfacing. More and more people, of all racial backgrounds, are coming to the realization that the stories America has told about itself are untrue—and if this is the case, then a new story must be told. The historical record and daily experience reveal that there has always been a concerted effort made by marginalized people to combat the effects of oppressive epistemology and ontology. Today is no different. To find soldiers in this battle, one need look no further than the diverse creative minds of today's American people, the marginalized avant-garde, the hip hoppers, graffiti artists, the poets and painters whose awareness of their selves transcends—because it counters—the limits of the Orthodox Western episteme. These street and folk theorists merge intellect with the creative urge, the post-black, post-soul, afro-futuristic spiritual folks whose theoretical foundations are capable of holding the remembrance of race with the prophetic vision of a future America and world capable of finally living up to its covenant, or—and this is most striking—of making a new one.

The forward-thinking artist of marginalized identity, the prophetic soul of the people, is the conjurer of today's society. Her words and presence, when trans-epistemic, gesture to a time and place where the possibility of change is real. She, then, must be the bringer of the “ceremony” for which Sylvia Wynter calls. No one is more equipped to balance the weight of theory with the prophetic necessity the great masses of people require. The politicians are tied up with special interests, and doomed to fail with the capitalists who have yoked us all into decline. Many of the academic theorists are too stuck in the detached and ineffective grammar of academia to connect with the numerous folks who can best use their expertise, and the folk have already lost much hope in race

leaders whose affection for the people has often failed to match their affection for cash. Scandal has made the pulpits all but failed in their spiritual efficacy amongst new converts, even as worsening situations force people to consider relinquishing their super-consumerist ways for a mode of being that feels meaningful. The burden for new definition, then, falls upon those whose gifts endow them with the capabilities to imagine beyond extant modes, to creatively and in the grammar of the people critique the Orthodox failures, and to engage at last the ceremony—the sacred exchange of word, the poetic connection—that will enrich the people and bring about a shift in consciousness out of which new codes can be formulated.

Enter this tribe of artists who emerge celebrating the beauty of what the Orthodoxy deemed ugly, the misfits and outcasts, the marginalized and liminal. Enter those whose voices demand attention and respect, whose healing words address the issues facing those whose portion it will be to inherit this disintegrating world. These poets, as custodians of the spirit, must take up the responsibility their potential demands, and through the age-old practice of Word, inaugurate the ceremony that will dissolve the faulty limitations of our episteme and bring about a new era in humanity.

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