

After Blackness, Then Blackness: Afro-Pessimism, Black Life, and Classical Hip Hop as Counter-Performance

Kevin Eubanks

Just as Frank Wilderson cites the propensity of the black performance to obscure and evade black life and reality and calls for a more “direct reflection” on the “ghosts and grammar” that haunt the enactment of black subjectivity, Jared Sexton’s critique of Fred Moten’s optimism lies in the latter’s emphasis on the “fugitive ontology” of blackness, an ontology that has the black always *on the run* from the structures that govern a priori the anti-black world into which it would pretend to escape. Consequently, the challenge of afro-pessimism is to imagine, amidst the afro-pessimist negation, a black movement that is *not* or *other than* performative, something more than a “narrative strategy hoping to slip the noose of a life shaped by slavery,” but instead a more visceral apprehension of and engagement with the structural violence against blackness as “a grammar of emergence and being.” The question I would like to answer here is whether in Hip Hop one can discern just such a movement and apprehension.

Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in [...]. That’s the whole point of the enterprise at some level. It is all about the implications of this agreed-upon point where arguments (should) begin, but they cannot (yet) proceed.

– Jared Sexton, “*The Social Life of Social Death*” (2011)

I know the price of life. I’m knowin’ how much it’s worth.

– Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015)

“Can I live?” -- when Jay-Z asks this question repeatedly on his 1996 album *Reasonable Doubt*, he not only asks the question that lies at the heart of the afro-pessimist critical tradition, but he also calls to mind the ongoing history of Hip Hop’s inquiry into the status and nature of black life and the everyday mantra, the “lived experience,” of so many black voices in America: “We hustle out of a sense of hopelessness, sort of a desperation [...]. We feel we have nothing to lose, so we offer you, well, we offer our lives. What do you bring to the table?” Here Jay-Z asks *the* question that echoes throughout slavery’s afterlife and stages his own encounter with the problem of whether Hip Hop might somehow craft a vital black existence out of social death; in the process, Jay-Z reinforces the dominant leitmotif both of afro-pessimism and of classical Hip Hop from the 1980s and 1990s.

On the one hand, Hip Hop’s *hustle* reflects the “outlaw ontology” and “criminal life” upon which Fred Moten bases his “pre(optical) optimism” in “The Case of Blackness” and through which he locates blackness’s escape route to independence.¹ On the other hand, afro-pessimism’s cautious apprehension surrounding the possibility of black social life, especially insofar as it is called a “fugitive” life (Moten), is also clearly

¹ Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 182.

in play across the Hip Hop aesthetic and an embedded feature of its ontology. Poised against the positive value assigned to such performativity is the insistence that these signs of life are still only shadows of life, a unique predicament that situates Hip Hop's particular expression of blackness alongside the contemporary debate between black optimists and afro-pessimists, and especially where that debate pivots on the limits of black performativity.

This predicament thrusts us, for instance, into the orbit of Saidiya Hartman's seminal commentary in *Scenes of Subjection* on the simultaneous effects of the slave performance, where "[o]ne performance [is] aimed to reproduce and secure the relations of domination and the other to manipulate appearances in order to challenge these relations and create a space for action not generally available."² For Hartman, any modicum of free movement granted in the performance is simultaneously challenged, ontologically-structurally, by the circumstances of its expression: "Since acts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice-versa."³ Conventional scholarship in Hip Hop studies generally comes down on one or the other side of Hartman's simultaneity. Hip Hop is said either to effectively challenge the political status quo through various means or it is said to reproduce the terms of its captivity.

Where Hartman's scene carves out "a space for action not generally available," Frank Wilderson's short but incisive critique in "Grammar and Ghosts" goes much further than Hartman's by denying "any causal link between the performance and the emancipation of the black people who produced and consumed it - as though art was the very essence of, rather than an accompaniment to, structural change."⁴ For Wilderson, any aesthetic-political gains made by the black performance nevertheless leave the substructures of anti-blackness intact; in short, Hartman's "space for action" is always already compromised - there simply is no free space for blackness in a world governed by whiteness. Jay-Z's refrain "Can I live?" remains a question, after all, and as such Hip Hop emerges not only as a performance of black (social) life but also, like afro-pessimism itself, as a valuable critical commentary on its relative possibility or impossibility.

Wilderson puts it bluntly at the end of "Grammar and Ghosts": "This is the problem that performance studies has yet to work through: How, or more to the point, why does one perform in and for a world that has forced upon one cartographic and temporal injunctions that are always already operative at every scale, from the body to the village to the nation to the continent to the diaspora? Who is served by [...] this easy grammatical join of art and liberation?"⁵ Every black performance, Wilderson says, is "haunted by the grammar and ghosts of Africa's structural violence," and this haunting

² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Frank Wilderson, "Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom," *Theatre Survey* 50, no. 1 (2009): 121.

⁵ Ibid, 124.

prevents the black performance from achieving the one thing structural change of the kind imagined by Wilderson requires, namely, as he calls it, “direct reflection.”⁶

Where Wilderson describes the problem as it animates or, rather, fails to animate the field of performance studies, Khalil Saucier and Tryon Woods describe the same problem as it manifests in Hip Hop studies: “Hip hop studies will remain utterly wretched unless it comes to terms with the structure of gratuitous violence in which it exists. In order to chart an ethical future, hip hop studies must *become* black studies, and in so doing, confront the ways in which black existence in an anti-black world – in other words, a universe where black life is structurally impermissible – is bound up with [...] a fugitive life ‘lived in loss.’”⁷ According to Saucier and Woods, Hip Hop studies too routinely embraces the performance of black pathology at the expense of taking head on the structural conditions that lead to the pathology in the first place; consequently, they challenge Hip Hop studies, in becoming *black* studies, to come to terms with the *structure* instead of the *performance* of black life.⁸

From its very beginnings, Hip Hop exposes these structures, effectively mapping the edge of a claustrophobic boundary that separates black social life from white civil society:

The Coup, “Not yet Free,” <i>Kill My Landlord</i> (1993)	Notorious BIG, “Suicidal Thoughts,” <i>Ready to Die</i> (1994)	Mobb Deep, “Shook Ones,” <i>Infamous</i> (1995)
In this land I can’t stand or sit and I get shit thrown up in my face A brother never gets his props I’m doing belly flops at the Department of Waste.	When I die, fuck it I wanna go to hell cuz I’m a piece of shit it ain’t hard to fucking tell It don’t make sense going to heaven with the goody-goodies, dressed in white I like black Timbs and black hoodies	When the slugs penetrate you feel a burning sensation getting closer to God in a tight situation Now take these words home and think it through or the next rhyme I write might be about you

There is, after all, no “easy grammatical join of art and liberation” at work in The Coup’s “belly flops,” Biggie’s self-loathing, or Mobb Deep’s “tight situation.” In these examples, Hip Hop clearly recognizes and seeks to come to terms with the gratuitous structural violence of black life, and, as I would like to argue here, realizes precisely

⁶ Ibid, 122-123.

⁷ P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, “Hip Hop Studies in Black,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 26, no. 2-3 (2014): 285.

⁸ Ibid, 274.

what Wilderson says is really wanted of black art and what Saucier and Woods say is wanted in Hip Hop studies, that is, a more “direct reflection” on the structural basis of black captivity.

Just as Wilderson cites the propensity of the black performance to obscure rather than make any kind of authentic contact with black social life, Jared Sexton takes to task Fred Moten’s positive emphasis on the “fugitive ontology” of blackness, an ontology that has blackness always *on the run* and as such always in flight *away* from the structures that govern a priori the anti-black world. Thus the broader challenge of afro-pessimism is to imagine amidst the afro-pessimist negation a more vital black movement that is *not* or *other* than performative, something more than a “narrative strategy hoping to slip the noose of a life shaped by slavery.”⁹ Only in the wake of a more visceral confrontation with anti-blackness can blackness convert the ghosts of slavery into what Wilderson calls “a grammar of emergence and being.”¹⁰ The question this essay would like to answer is whether in Hip Hop one can discern just such a movement.

Jared Sexton’s forceful reminder that black life, as impermissible as it may be, is nevertheless *lived*,¹¹ and Wilderson’s belief that performance and ontology do, in fact, meet, amount to a shared, albeit very cautious, optimism that implies a transformative black aesthetic and the possibility, not the impossibility (as one might expect), of blackness. According to afro-pessimism, what is wanted is a more direct critical engagement with the implications *for* black life of the antagonism itself – what Frank Wilderson refers to (over and against the liberation model) as a model of “understanding” and what Sexton refers to as the necessity of “getting inside [blackness].” It is, then, within the context of Moten’s “fugitive” performance and Wilderson’s biting critique of performativity that Sexton asks whether a black art that “affirms (social) life can avoid the thanatological dead end if it does not will its own (social) death.”¹² Sexton suggests that such a will is forced, in its “tight situation,” to take an unprecedented *turn* towards itself: “In a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black nonexistence [...] the zero degree of transformation is the turn toward blackness.”¹³

And this turn, I’d like to argue, would be tantamount to a *counter*-performance, a turning toward itself and, as such, toward an unprecedented confrontation with the oppressive productions of anti-blackness. From this opening, even if the limits of black performance cannot be denied, then at least we can imagine in Hip Hop the performance of a specifically black reality and life, one not scripted by whiteness – an entirely different kind of speech act, if you will, because it is an entirely different

⁹ Wilderson, “Grammar,” 122.

¹⁰ Ibid, 119.

¹¹ Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions* 5, (2011): 28-29.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 27.

entrance into language. Then again, it could just as easily be that in this rescripting or reterritorialization of blackness there is something (in the turning toward blackness) that undoes the performance itself in a much more absolute sense.

Simply put, what is wanted by afro-pessimism is the achievement of the understanding that the way *out* for blackness is *in*. And this curious resolution invites an answer to Sexton's challenge to his readers to conceive of black life as taking place in "a world in which the world does not live" and to accept afro-pessimism as "'not but nothing other than' black optimism."¹⁴ In turn, it also invites an answer to Wilderson's question of how an authentic black performance is possible, much less wanted, "*in and for* a world that has forced upon one cartographic and temporal injunction that are always already operative at every scale."¹⁵ The answer, it seems, is that it isn't, but this doesn't also render black life/art impossible since Sexton conceives for us a black life and black art that takes place neither *in* nor *for* an anti-black world but rather in and for a world in which *that* world does not live, a black world, and it is, consequently and following Sexton's clearing, only in and out of *this* world that an authentic black freedom and optimism can position itself to emerge.

In its turn toward blackness, Hip Hop performativity can be said to "come to terms with the structures of gratuitous violence," to become black studies, and to give voice to the "emergence and being" of an ontology that, while not yet free, is also no longer slave. Insofar as acts of resistance are always performative and, following Hartman, "acquire their character from [...] relations [of domination], and vice-versa,"¹⁶ these acts are not prevented from shaping an independent subjective and social relation to the dominant reality and, in effect, acquiring a freedom and movement, even a *world*, perhaps, that in another world is denied to them. Hip Hop would appear to operate and gather its force from its being jammed up at this confluence where Wilderson suggests performance and ontology merge into one.

In the center of The Coup's track "Not yet Free" (1993), after having spelled out the day to day struggle of black life – "I can't stand or sit and not get shit thrown up in my face" – lead MC, Boots Riley, raps:

*Niggas, thugs, dope dealers, and pimps, basketball players, rap stars and simps:
That's what little black boys are made of.
Sluts, hos, and press the naps around your neck, broads pop that coochie bitches stay in check:
That's what little black girls are made of.*

*But if we're made of that
Who made us?
And what can we do to change us?*

¹⁴ Ibid, 37.

¹⁵ See note 4 above.

¹⁶ See note 2 above.

Boots certainly recognizes a “blackness” in the performance, the way in which blackness is articulated, or, better, scripted within the black community, within Hip Hop, and under the authority and direction of a violent and oppressive system of anti-blackness – “I got a mirror in my pocket and I practice looking hard.” At the same time, his very recognition of the script handed down to blackness by whiteness and of another self struggling to navigate the imposition reveals a counter stance and a sort of anti- or counter-performance. Boots seeks to expose the imposition as script, to enlist his listeners and, by extension, the black community to rewrite the script anew, and thus to confront the structural antagonism itself in such a way, I think, called for by afro-pessimism insofar as in this verse what it means to *do* blackness and what it means to *be* black do, in fact, and rather self-consciously, meet.

Moreover, it is in this promise of the meeting, at the historical-aesthetic-critical crossing paths of blackness with itself, that both Wilderson and artists like The Coup evince optimism similar to Sexton’s faith in the turn toward blackness. In fact, one could say that Sexton’s turning takes place precisely at Wilderson’s intersection. Consequently, the question of how one might imagine the possibility of black social life is the right question to ask – against the backdrop of afro-pessimism’s claim that “there is no black (social) life,” Moten asks his readers in “The Case of Blackness” to “fathom a [black] social life that tends toward death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality?”¹⁷ As afro-pessimism insists, however, this question cannot be asked at the expense of the afro-pessimist denial but must always be envisioned against it. In other words, only once the end (or social death) of blackness has been announced (This is an “agreed upon point,” after all) can the social life of blackness be articulated for the first time. Therefore, we find ourselves with the afro-pessimists, and, not coincidentally, with Hip Hop, as much at the beginning of blackness as at the end of it.

The Turn toward Blackness

Deleuze and Guattari’s observation in *A Thousand Plateaus* that “European racism has never operated by exclusion, or by the designation of someone as Other”¹⁸ helps us to better understand what Sexton means when he says that the most radical negation of the anti-black world is also the most radical affirmation of a blackened one, which is to say, how such a turning toward blackness can be more precisely grasped as a turning away not from the antagonism as such but away from the pathology generated in it, becoming something other than “black” for the first time insofar as *this* is the name of the “impurity conferred upon it by a system of domination.”¹⁹ I want to argue here that it is in this otherness that the black freedom denied by afro-pessimism moves on its own and not according to but always against the dictates of white power. Sexton, whose

¹⁷ Moten, “Case,” 188.

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987): 160.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

work is close kin to Wilderson's, suggests it is precisely here, on the point of what afro-pessimism makes possible (instead of what it doesn't), that arguments should begin and that an authentic afro-optimism can be felt. Such a hard-fought optimism must necessarily move beyond *ressentiment* toward critique, where the long process of abolition can be completed, an enduring process that is no longer caught up in the affairs of the master, but rather, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, involves a "self-destruction [of blackness]" that has "nothing to do with the death drive"²⁰ and that, in fact, as Sexton argues, calls into being a world of its own. Within the scope of Deleuze and Guattari's critical race theory, the black world described by Sexton is not the "thanatological dead end"²¹ of social death that he warns about but rather the world opened up in the constant defense against it. And insofar as black studies is a way forward, it is also a way *toward* blackness and thus requires critical proximity as much as it requires critical distance, and Sexton's transformative aesthetic that has blackness turning toward itself is a useful lens through which to read Hip Hop, in its willing the death of one history through the grammar of another's emergence, as a way of moving blackness nearer to itself.

As afro-pessimism suggests, achieving this proximity to blackness begins with achieving a radical proximity to the structural negation that makes blackness what it is and then turning upon the negation in such a way that returns body and voice to the sovereign black subject and insists on being *against* the reality of its erasure:

Public Enemy, "Don't Believe the Hype <i>It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back</i> (1988)	NWA, "Fuck the Police," <i>Straight Outta Compton</i> (1988)	ODB, "Reunited," <i>Wu-Tang Forever</i> (1997)
Back - caught you lookin' for the same thing It's a new thing Check out this I bring Uh, oh, the roll below the level cuz I'm living low Next to the bass (C'mon!) Turn up the radio Number one, not born to run about the gun I wasn't licensed to have one The minute they see me,	<i>Ice Cube:</i> Fuck that shit cuz I ain't the one for a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun to be beating on <i>MC Ren:</i> I'm a sniper with a hell of a scope taking out a cop or two they can't cope with me	Bitch ass niggas counterfeit the funk I smoke the bead of the skunk, tree top of the trunk, moonshine drunken monk, your head get shrunk, your treasure sunk. My name's Black you worms wanna play in my dirt? Bitch stop! My momma serves free lunch from the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

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fear me	[...]	church [...]
I'm the epitome	So I'mma turn it around	Unglove the noose
of "public enemy"	put in my clip, yo	Watch a nigga transfuse
Used, abused,	and this is the sound	Dirty add to the fuse
without clues		
I refuse to blow a fuse	<i>Easy E:</i>	
	They put out my picture	
	with silence	
	cuz my identity by itself	
	causes violence	

Old Dirty Bastard's (ODB's) unique style famously "has no father" (36 Chambers) and thus operates at least in part independently of the father's authority. Hip Hop, in a similar denial, functions independently of the authority of both black and white performance traditions even as it (mis)appropriates them and in doing so bastardizes what Moten calls the "natal occasion" of blackness, black captivity and black artistic traditions. ODB seems to know he is already dead, a social corpse he calls by its name, his name: "Black." And, yet, it is the signature of a life that resonates with the question of whether in Hip Hop we can name something as an affirmation that both recognizes the truth-claims of afro-pessimism and somehow responds to its forceful negations. ODB's verse clearly reflects the "gratuitous violence in which [Hip Hop] exists," and he plays the role of the quintessential antagonist in the plot of white reality well enough, but it is also as much a vigorous counter-stance - "Unglove the noose/Watch a nigga transfuse" - as it is a *mere* performance of black pathology,²² and breaking through the surface of his performance is the voice and figure of a black protagonist that owes nothing to the white script, and thus involves an emphatic self-overcoming of "blackness" that begins not with evasion but with a willing encounter with what it means to *be* towards death. The otherwise very literal dead end signaled in the sharp finality and recognition of the premise, "My name's Black," opens at the same time toward an enigmatic subjectivity, and, even more so, an indecipherability for which ODB is well-known and that in its (only apparently) parodic enactment of blackness manifests as a constant threat to white capacity in and through which, it may be said, both abolition and a particular kind of black social life are realized. In this way, Hip Hop performativity actively resists speaking in and for an anti-black world, "You worms wanna play in my dirt? Bitch stop!," and in doing so confirms the inseparability of black performance and ontology.

These deliberate strategies are at work, too, in NWA's violent positioning over and against the police, where Cube asserts his dignity and independence ("I ain't the one [...] to be beating on"); Easy E actively enters that busy crossing where black performance and black identity, where a black and a white script, converge ("[M]y identity itself causes violence"); and Ren deftly recognizes the incapacity of white

²² Greg Thomas says the same of "gangsta" rap in Hip Hop Revolution in the Flesh.

power to “cope” with the appearance of this new iteration of blackness when he quite literally stops running and turns around (“So I’mma *turn it around*/Put in my clip, yo,/and *this is the sound*”) in a move that aligns his turning both with a brand new positioning of black subjectivity over and against the state and with the sound of the blast, that is to say, with Hip Hop music and culture and the birth of “gangsta” rap.

Public Enemy’s turn toward blackness, while stylistically easily differentiated from NWA’s or the Wu-Tang Clan’s or anyone else’s, nevertheless stakes out a similar claim relative both to the divide between the performance and the ontology of blackness and to the structural obstacles of anti-blackness. On the one hand, the so-called “fear of a black planet” has its source in the historical mechanics of anti-blackness, where white civil society continually stokes its own irrational fear of the black subject – “They see me, fear me/I’m the epitome of ‘public enemy’). It is in this sense that Public Enemy is “back” again, another revolutionary voice in the history of slave rebellions and the ongoing struggle for civil equality and freedom. On the other hand, they quite literally catch us “looking for the same thing,” when, as they point out, “it’s a new thing.”

In all of these examples Hip Hop is *not* “born to run”; it is both a “sequel” and an original (“Number One”). It is not so much late as right on time, a brand new thing, and, as such, it invokes something *other* than performance since to perform “blackness” means to (re)iterate an inherited identity/value that has been maintained and developed over time and, perhaps most importantly, that has been conferred upon the performer from the outside. Here in these examples and across the rhythmic Hip Hop landscape, we find a blackness speaking of itself for itself and “out of the possibilities embedded in a social *life*.”²³ That in each case we are talking about a black ontology *and* Hip Hop performativity certainly presents a difficulty, but this difficulty is both a vital symptom of their inseparability and a function of the genre. In fact, Hip Hop enters the history of discourse surrounding the character and nature of black life and agency in this way, with an optimistic strength and vitality that is in play in each of the examples above; as Chuck D insists, “YES! was the start of my last jam.”

Consequently, it is possible that in the turn toward blackness (Sexton) that is at the same time the new work of understanding and of engaged reflection (Wilderson) blackness moves freely within the antagonism itself, or, perhaps, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, *on* it: “Staying stratified – organized, signified, subjected – is not the worst that can happen [...]. This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements [...], lines of flight.”²⁴ It seems when Wilderson asks us to replace the work of liberation with the work of understanding or when Sexton describes his turn toward blackness, they are challenging their readers to imagine black life as only possible within this predicament, within the context and confines of its subjection. Insofar as this is the case, the afro-pessimist antagonism begins to acquire the look and

²³ Moten, “Case,” 192.

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand*, 161.

feel of the Deleuzian stratum, the black hole in/on the white face, which must be lived in and dealt with from the inside, or better, “the dividing line is not between the inside and outside but rather is internal to simultaneous signifying chains and successive subjective choices.”²⁵

The Deleuzian stratum and the structural antagonisms of anti-blackness clearly accommodate the simultaneous effects of Hartman’s slave performance, where a “space for action” is carved out and amplified on (and *only* on) *one* side of the simultaneity, a so-called “line of flight.” It is obvious enough that Hip Hop, in this scenario, manages to “experiment with the opportunities [the stratum] offers,” but, remaining “stratified – organized, signified, subjected, etc.,” nevertheless maintains the structural effects of anti-blackness. Accordingly, the black subject, in chasing its liberty, and in keeping with the afro-pessimist paradigm, finds itself again in escape mode and still very much on the run. In order to achieve truly decisive political effects, blackness must at some point stop running and turn around, as NWA, Public Enemy, and Wu-Tang all do in the above examples. Such moves are an affront to the simultaneity of the slave performance and the successive effects of oppression and threaten the integrity of the structures that support them, and it is through these means that black art (and life) begins to acquire its character from something *other* than those “relations of domination” that have historically held it captive.

After all, the black hole can only appear on the white face, and yet the future of the face, we are told, is guaranteed only in its undoing. Remarkably, Deleuze and Guattari also tell us that “there is something absolutely inhuman about the face. [...]. The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start,”²⁶ and as such the black slash/black hole emerges here as something like the mark of black human agency and practice upon it. Here at least it would seem that Deleuze and Guattari are in agreement with the afro-pessimists, for whom becoming something other than black is the only thing that breaks the antagonism apart – thus the only way to move past the afterlife of slavery is to destabilize the white face and so enter the afterlife of blackness itself, for, as Public Enemy would have it, blackness can always find itself situated at the edge of an entirely new significance and signification.

Praxis as Counter-Performance

The structural antagonism that divides the world of the slave from the world of the human provokes the obvious response – the answer to black freedom lies in the restoration of black humanity, in slavery’s abolition, in its becoming human once again – but it is precisely this, remember, that has been made “impermissible.” For Wilderson, the case against the performative lies in “the prohibition against attaining differentiation or self-knowledge” stemming from the “structural violence that removes

²⁵ Ibid, 178.

²⁶ Ibid, 171.

black 'people' from the world."²⁷ Wilderson's case, of course, follows on the heels of many others, including Hartman, who wonders "whether the rights of man and citizen are realizable or whether the appellation 'human' can be borne equally by all"²⁸ and Sylvia Wynter, for whom "'humanity' refuses to signify any ontological primacy within Afro-diasporic discourses."²⁹ As Hartman points out, the shift "from chattel to man" is merely "a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection" (6). Thus the promise of civil society is one that cannot be kept, or rather, in being kept denies to blackness exactly what it was promised in the first place. Consequently, becoming something other than black also means becoming something other than human, insofar as this, too, is derived from the relations of domination that support the structural antagonism afro-pessimists have worked so hard to expose. And this is precisely where Sylvia Wynter's work is so pertinent, since Wynter, who admits the immovable conception both of the human category and of the white civil society built upon it, in short, the total force of the afro-pessimist structural analysis, nevertheless conceives of a way of being without and outside of it. Wynter describes this becoming other as a process through which blackness and what it means to be human, an authentic black humanity, are "redefined as praxis."

The way in which Wynter's thought has been deployed to locate black life in black music is altogether kindred with Moten's objectives in *In the Break* and "The Case of Blackness" and resonates directly with Sexton's question of whether an aesthetics that "affirms (social) life can avoid the thanatological dead end if it does not will its own (social) death."³⁰ As Katherine McKittrick explains, according to Wynter, "black cultural production writes scientific and disciplinary knowledge anew, as necessarily a human project."³¹ And, as Alexander Weheliye argues, Wynter's brand of "[b]lack humanism disenchants 'Man as Man,' bringing 'into being different modes of the *human*' because it deploys the very formulation of 'man' as catachresis."³² Both Wynter and others, like Kodwo Eshun, view black music as a potential staging ground for a black humanity that is otherwise obscured by anti-blackness. However, where Eshun tends to locate black humanity in the "nonhuman otherworldliness" of Afrofuturist music, Wynter understands that black being is always being-in-the-world and thus requires a special proximity signaled only in the turn *toward* blackness, which, according to Wynter, is at the same time a turn *toward* 'praxis' insofar as blackness is the product of both an individual and collective "self-making" (Thomas). And what else is Hip Hop if not just such a turning toward, a black lodging in/on the white face that gathers its strength

²⁷ Wilderson, "Grammar," 121.

²⁸ Hartman, *Scenes*, 6.

²⁹ Alexander G. Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text*-71 20, no. 2 (2002): 27.

³⁰ Sexton, "Social Life," 16.

³¹ Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2015).

³² Weheliye, "Feenin'," 27.

and virtue by “tearing the conscious away from the subject in order to make it a means of exploration, tearing the unconscious away from significance [*sic*] and interpretation in order to make it a veritable production”³³ and/or ‘praxis’? From Wynter’s perspective, the distinction between what it means to *be* black and what it means to *do* blackness falls away and collapses in the category of ‘praxis,’ through which an authentic black humanity is quite literally *made* intelligible.

Although there are many ways in which Hip Hop accomplishes this making, and a thorough treatment of all of them is well beyond the scope of my objectives here, such an achievement is primarily enabled and made manifest through Hip Hop’s linguistic and sonic in(ter)ventions, all of which are made readily apparent in the figure of *the flow* – that apotheosis of linguistic freedom to which every rap aspires and around which Hip Hop’s ritualistic experimentation with language and meaning revolves. In fact, nothing quite conflates *being* and *doing* blackness like the “veritable production[s]” of black voices that Hip Hop, essentially, *is*. And, yet, because language is wholly determined by structural conditions that prevent its ever being able to name that to which it would hope to refer, or, rather, *only* name it – this, by the way, is the manner by which language facilitates our primal separation from being – and Hip Hop is unimaginable without the language through which it is performed, one would guess that blackness is cursed, so to speak, to be always chasing, fugitive-like, something like the “ghosts” of Wilderson’s haunting.

We may do well here to remember Theodor Adorno’s take on the end of art (as, not coincidentally, Moten does in “The Case of Blackness”) since for Adorno it is precisely this coincidence that ensures art’s continuation: “Art survives because the moment to realize it was missed.” Adorno’s paradox is not at all unlike Wilderson’s not so “easy grammatical join of art and liberation” – performance falls short precisely because it is an accompaniment to structural change and not necessary to it. For art to hit its target is for it to no longer *be* art. This predicament mirrors the one blackness is in, for blackness, too, cannot hope to ever coincide with itself because of the structural intrusions of anti-blackness and the processes that remove black people from the world. And yet all of Hip Hop aspires to a condition under which language as performance *becomes* the realization of its original freedom and in so doing becomes something other than performance – this is what the flow *is*, and it serves to illustrate the way in which Hip Hop cuts across the nature of performance, and, in the process, provides an analogy to black life that truly belongs to it. When Hip Hop hits its target, blackness *per se*, it, too, ceases to be performance and becomes something else in becoming itself.

It is no accident, for instance, that Hip Hop, the historical origins of which can be traced to the street cipher and to party DJs, like DJ Kool Herc, who began to “talk” over the record, emerges out of an economic, technological lack and isolation, or, put differently, just another kind of voicelessness. Every written/recorded rap, after all, invokes a memory of itself as *freestyle*, and nothing links the performance of blackness in Hip Hop more clearly and directly with the structural “noose of slavery” and the

³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand*, 160.

ontological status of the black subject than Boots' notation at the end of "Not Yet Free": "No, this is not yet freestyle cuz we are not yet free." Nevertheless, in voicing the limits of its own performance, Hip Hop's awareness generates a threatening and viable counter-position over and against those relations of domination in which it knows it is caught up.

Both the turn toward blackness and the counter-performative can be seen operating across Hip Hop, where what is reinforced is the amplification of a distinctly black grammar and agency. On Method Man and Redman's *Blackout!* (1999), guest MC, Streetlife, raps:

*I'm the cynical, lyrical, rap individual
On my death bed I spit sick flows that's critical
I'm not a fan of this, I'm a mic vandalist
Thug therapist, my clan's too original [...]
Who wanna come test, lick the sweat from my genitals
We can get off the mic and get a little physical*

In this verse, as in so many others, the mic amplifies rather than silences the black voice and predicament. As ODB showed us earlier, Street Life's flow exemplifies the way in which a rap aesthetic inaugurates a specific and original way of being in the world; the names of this new black subject proliferate throughout the sequence: mic vandalist, thug therapist, rhyme writer, hip hop provider, live wire. Just as ODB begins at the end ("You worms wanna play in my dirt"), here a "cynical, lyrical, rap individual" is born on his "deathbed spittin' sick flows that's critical." The very emphasis on the critical and criminal nature of the flow and the rap commentary betrays the understanding on the part of many rappers that what they are up to is precisely *not* performance: "I'm not a fan of this." Streetlife not only acknowledges the pastless and hard to capture nature of his flow ("My clan's too original"), but he also insists that the space between the Hip Hop performance and black lived experience is one that is easily crossed: "We can get off the mic and get a little physical." The routine analogy that links the mic with black lived experience and that is revealed through this both literal and figurative amplification stages the drama of an original black experience and pleasure that is first and foremost *voiced*, or as Method Man follows Streetlife on the same track: "It ain't your granddaddy's music/it's Hip Hop/Coming through your woofer like a mulekick/100,000 watts." At any rate, what it means to *be* black is transformed in these and many of the other examples I have shared into an assertive and positive ontology, confirming, I believe, Lewis Gordon's insistence that the only way to be against anti-blackness is to be black, which is, after all, just another kind of turning toward.³⁴ Thus Method Man reminds us elsewhere on *Blackout!*: "I'm still ghetto, rhyme ghetto, my

³⁴ Lewis Gordon, "Black Existence in Philosophy and Culture," *Diogenes* 59, no. 3-4 (2014): 96-105.

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peoples ghetto, pants sagging, teeth yellow. Now that's what I call grimy, a million crazy kids behind me."

Everywhere in Hip Hop, rap's singularity and probing inquiry into the status of black (social) life is enlisted to move past the limits of performance toward the Real, and this observation should go some way toward revitalizing the authenticity debates about the implications of Hip Hop's constant reminder to "keep it real":

Jay Z, "Where I'm From," <i>In My Lifetime, Vol. 1</i> (1997)	Jaylib, "Survival Test," <i>Champion Sound</i> (2003)
Your word was everything so everything you said you'd do, you did it couldn't talk about it if you ain't lived it I'm from where niggas pull your card and argue all day about who's the best MC Biggie, Jay-Z, or Nas?	You don't wanna be without here Niggas ain't giving a fuck they'll pull it out here [...] How a lotta blood get spilled out here It's fucked up but it's real out here Is that how it is out there? Shit don't make sense out here

In "Where I'm From" Jay-Z offers a riveting sketch of black life in the neighborhood where he grew up. In addition to painting a picture of a "world in which the world does not live" ("I'm from where the other guys don't walk too much"), "Where I'm From" blurs the line between the Hip Hop performance and black lived experience in at least two ways. Jay-Z is able to "talk about it" precisely because he has "lived it," and he notes the inseparability of the other world in which he lives and the talking about it, which is to say, of course, Hip Hop itself – "I'm from where niggas pull your card/ And argue all day about who's the best MC/Biggie, Jay-Z, or Nas?" Similarly, Mobb Deep's seminal "Shook Ones" begins with the listener "stuck off the realness" and a dedication of their "performance" not to fans but to "real niggas who ain't got no feelings," and famously claims, "For every rhyme I write it's 25 to life." In each case rap wishes to transcend performance and the trap of language toward a taking over of what it means, as Moten suggests, to *be* toward death, a counter-performance and counter-discourse that in the turn toward blackness, in the head on engagement with its own social death, plans to find itself somewhere in the difference between what Madlib calls above "here" and "there."

This active acknowledgement (that is at the same time a production) of the difference between the world of whiteness and the world "where the others guys don't walk too much" exposes blackness as a kind of "catachresis" like that described by Weheliye above. As such, it also goes some way toward revealing how Hip Hop, as counter-performance, tackles the difficult task of acquiring what Wilderson cites as being essential to black ontological and political freedom, namely "differentiation and

self-knowledge"³⁵:

Mobb Deep, "Shook Ones," <i>Infamous</i> (1995)	Inspectah Deck, "Triumph," <i>Wu-Tang Forever</i> (1999)	Kendrick Lamar, "Momma," <i>To Pimp a Butterfly</i> (2015)
You don't know me There's no relation	I bomb atomically Socrates' philosophies and hypotheses can't define how I be droppin' these mockeries	This feeling is unmatched this feeling is brought to you by adrenaline and good rap black Pendleton ball cap We don't share the same synonym, fall back

These verses convey a specifically black pleasure and politically powerful "counter-violence"³⁶ and counter-knowledge that reveal itself when Hip Hop *becomes* black, so to speak. There is in these passages something of Wynter's *other* humanity writing "scientific and disciplinary knowledge anew" as well as the metacognition of the kinship between Hip Hop and blackness as such; as we saw earlier, blackness, like *the flow*, is "hard to capture" (Wu-Tang). There is also something indecipherable, untranslatable in what is given, something invisible and inaudible to the non-black spectator that calls into being a uniquely black subjectivity forcefully positioned against a dominant language and reality. "Shit don't make sense out here," Madlib says, and between "here" and "there," there is no "relation," no "synonym," "fall back," or as the Wu-Tang would have it ("Reunited," 1997): "Uncompleted missions, throw in your best known compositions/You couldn't add it up if you mastered addition (GZA)" or "How can I put it?/Life is like video footage, hard to edit/Directors, they never understood it (RZA)."

The productive tension here between an ontology of black art/life, its right to exist, and the administrative, historical (white) world in which it appears, which prohibits its existence, and thus against which black life/art always measures its powers *to be*, mirrors Moten's critical distinction between Fanon's infamous conception of blackness as "an object in the midst of other objects"³⁷ and a black *Dasein*, or social-ontological agency [*lit.* being there], that exceeds this objectivity, a difference between the made thing (*Sache*) and the thing/world of its making (*Ding*).³⁸ It thus also clarifies, here at the end, the difference between blackness as the made thing in a world from which blackness, according to Wilderson, has been removed, and Sexton's world "in which the world does not live," the world not *from* but *to* which blackness has been

³⁵ Wilderson, "Grammar."

³⁶ Thomas, "Hip Hop Revolution."

³⁷ Quoted in Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, "Raw Life: An Introduction," *Qui Parle* (2003): 53.

³⁸ Moten, "Case," 182.

removed, a world of its own making. Hip Hop, it can be said, transforms black subjected-ness into an “aesthetic sociality”³⁹ that not only *belongs* to blackness and black social life, but that gave/gives life to this modern black world “in which the world does not live,” ultimately transforming what it means to be black from a mere affirmation of white capacity into a radical affirmation of black life, which is, as Sexton suggests, also “a radical negation of anti-blackness”⁴⁰ – or, as Kendrick Lamar points out so beautifully (and much more recently) on *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015):

*I know everything, I know everything
 Know myself
 I know morality, spirituality, good and bad health
 I know fatality might haunt you
 I know everything, I know Compton
 I know street shit, I know shit that's conscious, I know everything [...]
 I know everything, I know history
 I know the universe works mentally [...]*

*I know how people work, I know the price of life
 I'm knowin' how much it's worth
 I know what I know and I know it well
 Not to ever forget until I realized I didn't know shit
 The day I came home.*

So it is through the counter-performance, a Hip Hop ‘praxis,’ that a black *Dasein* is revealed, and in the turn toward itself blackness comes *to know* itself though the structural violence at the ground of its existence. Kendrick Lamar’s homecoming is a (re)turn toward the long-obscured black (social) self *as* being-towards-death. And this is how afro-pessimism conveys a dynamic optimism in the turn toward blackness that in its “radical affirmation of a blackened world” is both a turning *other* for the first time *and* a turn (again) toward black humanity. Also, this is how Hip Hop emerges as an ongoing historical, subjective, and social hermeneutics – a constant “breaking it down,” so to speak; just as the history of afro-pessimism is an expression of the same *care*.

We cannot ever return to a world in which there was no slave, but we can also never reach a place in time in which what it means to be black, including the possibility of its meaning nothing at all, can be permanently decided. Perhaps blackness, too, is something always still to be settled, and so contains within it the ever-present possibility of its becoming, along the way, something else entirely. This is more likely than not the case if we can bring ourselves to imagine the social-ontological “death” of blackness (and the afro-pessimist critical tradition that responds to it) as the symptom of black free agency and of the diminishment of white power and anti-blackness instead of *only* as the cruel effect of white capacity. Thus even if we accept the allegations

³⁹ See note 37 above.

⁴⁰ Sexton, “Social Life.”

surrounding its end, and rappers like Kendrick Lamar certainly give us reason to doubt it, black life is encouraged (not discouraged) because Hip Hop *was*. And if Hip Hop can be said to have ended, then this is because the moment to realize it was *not* missed.

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