

BLACK OPTIMISM/BLACK OPERATION

Fred Moten
Chicago, 10/19/07

“Black Studies is the critique of Western civilization.”
Cedric Robinson

“I ran from it and was still in it.”
John’s Uncle’s preacher

My field is black studies. In that field, I’m trying to hoe the hard row of beautiful things. I try to study them and I also try to make them. Elizabeth Alexander says “look for color everywhere.” For me, color + beauty = blackness which is not but nothing other than who, and deeper still, where I am. This shell, this inhabitation, this space, this garment—that I carry with me on the various stages of my flight from the conditions of its making—is a zone of chromatic saturation troubling any ascription of impoverishment of any kind however much it is of, which is to say in emergence from, poverty (which is, in turn, to say in emergence from or as an aesthetics or a poetics of poverty). The highly cultivated nature of this situated volatility, this emergent poetics of the emergency, is the open secret that has been the preoccupation of black studies.

But it must be said now—and I’ll do so by way of a cool kind of accident that has been afforded us by the danger and saving power that is power point—that there is a strain of black studies that strains against black studies and its object, the critique of western civilization, precisely insofar as it disavows its aim (blackness or the thinking of blackness, which must be understood in what some not so strange combination of Nahum Chandler and Martin Heidegger might call its paraontological distinction from black people).

There was a moment in Rebecca’s presentation when the image of a black saxophonist (I think, but am not sure, that it was the great Chicago musician Fred Anderson) is given to us as a representative, or better yet a denizen (as opposed to

citizen), of the “space of the imagination.” What’s cool here, and what is also precisely the kind of thing that makes practitioners of what might be called the new ~~black~~ studies really mad, is this racialization of the imagination which only comes fully into its own when it is seen in opposition, say, to that set of faces or folks who constituted what I know is just a part of Lauren’s tradition of Marxist historiographical critique. That racialization has a long history and begins to get codified in a certain Kantian discourse, one in which the imagination is understood to “produce nothing but nonsense,” a condition that requires that “its wings be severely clipped by the imagination.” What I’m interested in, but which I can only give a bare outline of, is a two-fold black operation—one in which Kant moves toward something like a thinking of the imagination as blackness that fully recognizes the irreducible desire for this formative and deformative, necessarily supplemental necessity; one in which black studies ends up being unable to avoid a certain sense of itself as a Kantian, which is to say anti-Kantian and ante-Kantian, endeavor. The new black studies, or to be more precise, the old-new black studies, since every iteration has had this ambivalence at its heart, can’t help but get pissed at the terrible irony of its irreducible Kantianness precisely because it works so justifiably hard at critiquing that racialization of the imagination and the racialized opposition of imagination (in its lawless, nonsense producing freedom) and critique that turns out to be the condition of possibility of the critical philosophical project.

There is a voraciously instrumental anti-essentialism, powered in an intense and terrible way by good intentions, that is the intellectual platform from which black studies’ disavowal of its object and aim is launched, even when that disavowal comes in something which also thinks itself to be moving in the direction of that object and aim. I’m trying to move by way of a kind of resistance to that anti-essentialism, one that requires a paleonymic relation to blackness; I’m trying to own a certain dispossession, the underprivilege of being-sentenced to this gift of constantly escaping and to standing in for the fugitivity (to echo Natahaniel Mackey, Daphne Brooks and Michel Foucault) (of the imagination) that is an

irreducible property of life, persisting in and against every disciplinary technique while constituting and instantiating not just the thought but that actuality of the outside that is what/where blackness is—as space or spacing of the imagination, as condition of possibility and constant troubling of critique.

It's annoying to perform what you oppose, but I just want you to know that I ain't mad. I loved these presentations, partly because I think they loved me or at least my space, but mostly because they were beautiful. I love Kant, too, by the way, though he doesn't love me, because I think he's beautiful too and, as you know, a thing of beauty is a joy forever. But even though I'm not mad, I'm not disavowing that strain of black studies that strains against the weight or burden, the refrain, the strain of being-imaginative and not-being-critical that is called blackness and that black people have had to carry. Black Studies strains against a burden that, even when it is thought musically, is inseparable from constraint. But my optimism, black optimism, is bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the oppositional, runaway black operations that have been thrust upon it. The burden, the constraint, is the aim, the paradoxically aleatory goal that animates escape in and the possibility of escape from. Here is one such black op—a specific, a capella instantiation of strain, of resistance to constraint and instrumentalization, of the propelling and constraining force of the refrain, that will allow me to get to a little something concerning the temporal paradox of, and the irruption of ecstatic temporality in, optimism, which is to say black optimism, which is to say blackness. I play this in appreciation for being in Chicago, which is everybody's sweet home, everybody's land of California, as Robert Johnson puts it. This is music from a Head Start program in Mississippi in the mid-sixties and as you all know Chicago is a city in Mississippi, Mississippi a (fugue) state of mind in Chicago.

**“Da Da Da Da,” The Child Development Group of Mississippi,
Smithsonian Folkways Records, FW02690 1967**

The temporal paradox of optimism—that it is, on the one hand, necessarily futural so that optimism is an attitude we take towards that which is to come; but that it is, on the other hand, in its proper Leibnizian formulation, an assertion not only of the necessity but also of the rightness and the essential timelessness of the always already existing, resonates in this recording. It is infused with that same impetus that drives a certain movement, in *Monadology*, from the immutability of monads to that enveloping of the moral world in the natural world that Leibniz calls, in Augustinian echo/revision, “the City of God.” With respect to C. L. R. James and José (Muñoz), and a little respectful disrespect to Lee Edelman, these children are the voices of the future in the past, the voices of the future in our present. In this recording, this remainder, their fugitivity, remains, for me, in the intensity of their refrain, of their straining against constraint, cause for the optimism they perform. That optimism always lives, which is to say escapes, in the assertion of a right to refuse, which is, as Gayatri Spivak says, the first right: an instantiation of a collective negative tendency to differ, to resist the regulative powers that resistance, that differing, call into being. To think resistance as originary is to say, in a sense, that we have what we need, that we can get there from here, that there’s nothing wrong with us or even, in this regard, with here, even as it requires us still to think about why it is that difference calls the same, that resistance calls regulative power, into existence, thereby securing the vast, empty brutality that characterizes here and now. Nevertheless, however much I keep trouble in mind, and therefore, in the interest of making as much trouble as possible, I remain hopeful insofar as I will have been in this very collective negative tendency, this little school within and beneath school that we gather together to be. For a bunch of little whiles, this is our field (i.e., black studies), our commons or undercommons or underground or outskirts and it will remain so as long as it claims its fugitive proximity to blackness, which I will claim, with ridiculousness boldness, is the condition of possibility of politics.

Feel me?

NOTES FOR BLACK OPS

I am gonna do something called "Black Ops." In addition to the notion of a black operation I am also interested in something I would like to call black optimism, something that will illuminate the convergence of the condition of possibility and the end of politics (something James would think as "the future in the present," something King would discuss under the rubric of the "fierce urgency of now" where fierce urgency denotes not only pain but also pleasure--I'm talking about an exigency that, above all, inheres in and radiates from, The Music). Eventually, and it's too much to go into here, this will open up some ways to link up some questions emerging out of Leibniz and extended by Russell and Deleuze and my old teacher Ann Banfield that will allow me to consider some interplay between blackness and the baroque and will, therefore, link up to the essay on Glenn Gould, Beethoven and filmic practice. Ultimately, there are some things I want to say about Gould and Cecil Taylor that will, I hope, allow an articulation of something, in relation each to the other, regarding the political history of the present. Obviously, what I'm contemplating will either be one hundred pages or ten very dense and poetic ones. Some aphorisms, some variations or, perhaps more precisely, some rhythmic figures, some heads invoking arrangement, as it were, or an arrangement.

Black ops. Back Sites. What is it that now one has to forge a paleonymic (r)elation to black, to blackness? The word persists, now, under erasure or eclipse, ceded to the state of law/exception. The word is begrudged, grungy, dingy, encased in a low tinge, always understood as being in need of a highlight it already has or that chromatic saturation that it already is.

Resistance and (the auto-poetics of) organization (flight + inhabitation).
optimism/monad/baroque/blackness

Nomad and monad. N gets a letter from M.

What's the relationship between saying, "utopia is submerged in or in the interstices or on the outskirts of the present" and saying, "this is the best of all possible worlds" (a Leibnizian optimism) and saying, "the history of abolitionism is not the history of a set of wholly rhetorical exhortations, whether rational or ecstatic, but is, rather, the history of an infinite set or line of quotidian "escape acts" (as Daphne Brooks might say) which operate at the

level of rhetoric as well as the aesthetic and which, therefore, might include but need not be reduced to this or that particular instance of abolitionist rhetoric?"

Laid back, spread out, stretched out, laid out. Part of what's necessary is the realization of an analytic that moves through the opposition of voluntary secrecy and forced exposure. What's needed is some way to understand how the underground operates out in the open and, perhaps deeper still, as the open in something like the ways Agamben/Rilke/Santner have tried to approach. What's the relation between the border/limit and the open? Between blackness and the limit/edge? Between a quite specific and materially redoubled finitude or being-limited and the open? What a certain discourse on the relation between blackness and death seems to try to get to—in the best (which is to say least tragically neurotic) instances of that discourse—lies, at least, in vicinity of this question.

Leibniz/Russell/Deleuze/Banfield: The monad and the thing. The blues as black op (undercover, off the books, in the service of resistance or rearguard, assassination or non-violent refusal while at the same time being not just violently commodified but, more precisely and viciously, of the commodity or, at least, of her trace): In honor of Chicago and of a vast range of sweet homes: between Robert Johnson and Leo Smith, Leland Mississippi, right between Greenville and Indianola, right on 61 Highway (the monad is nomadic, at least in her head). On the relation between blackness and the baroque, an irregular pearl, following from Deleuze's thought regarding the relation between baroque and minimalism.

Seeking out the state is all bound up with frowning on things. Seeking out the state is not the same thing as looking after what does not escape. The fugitive escapes but she does not escape. Escape is not accomplished but is a thing(liness) we love. Seeking out the state is a kind of piety. I worked in prisons. So did I. I talk with the spirits. I seek out the state.

Puritanism hurtles towards secularism. An all too verifiable past, lives crowded with incident, smothered by precedent. One has a choice to face up to not having a choice. There is no unheard appeal. Poetry will have never been obscene having been a haven. Holding fast is not the opposite of running away, is not in between. The dismal swamp is a jam, an open waterway. Why seek out the state? Comfort under the state's protection, which is a kind of brutality. We appeal to the future we imagine. We imagine what we are. Blackness as appeal, as escape. We are always also walking in another world.

My archive is a dehiscence at the heart of the archive and on its edge—a disorder, an appeal.

My political desire scratches discontent.

On the very idea of the passage—what do Deleuze and Krauss mean by it? Where does it come from? From a long time ago, via Uncle Toliver and Equiano, working out the notion of ensemble, I try to speak of an “improvisatory whole” in relation to the barest beginnings of a more critically aware understanding of “passage”: what is the relation between passage in this context and those passages of sculpture of which Krauss and Deleuze speak? Deleuze invokes Tony Smith; Krauss is more inclined towards David Smith. Deleuze is specific in his invocation of T. Smith as a kind of precursor to his own extension of the monadology. He invokes those same passages in Smith that Fried derides. The improvisatory whole, the monad, the icon, the thing.

Jazz, oratorio and baroque. Blackness and the baroque.

What is exposure? What is an aesthetics of exposure?

The bright side is the dark side, the black hand side, the west side, the south side, where they be talking about in the evening when the sun go down as if it has not nothing but something else, something other, to do with the *Abendland*. To look with love at things, to look as if you so broke, so baroque, that you can't pay attention.