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Ontological Bodies in AntiBlack Worlds:
Disability, Humanness, and an Otherwise Politics of Being

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in African American Studies

by

Jenna Alexandra Taylor

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Ontological Bodies in AntiBlack Worlds:
Disability, Humanness, and an Otherwise Politics of Being

Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles

Professor Ugo F. Edu, Chair

by

Jenna Alexandra Taylor

My thesis, entitled, “Ontological Bodies in AntiBlack Worlds: Disability, Humanness, and an Otherwise Politics of Being,” is an investigation of what Sylvia Wynter in her article “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” calls, “a politics of being.” More specifically, I am interested in tracing Sylvia Wynter’s concepts of the evolution of Man and it’s overdetermination, the way in which humanness came to be coterminous with (certain arrangements of) flesh, and how this concatenation has come to bear on disability as a politics of being that is dependent on an antiBlack ontological schema. This exploration wends its way through multiple sites, both excavating their specificity and stringing them together like pearls: the western university, the field of western medicine—or as I will elaborate, western

ethnomedicine—a tendency that appears in disability studies that I will argue is ‘ultranormative,’ and the language we have been given to denote disability as a discrete phenomenon of bodily arrangement leading to discrimination. Additionally, this thesis is deeply invested in methodology. Using a speculative form of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call “study,” and that signals what Katherine McKittrick calls, “the fictive work of theory,” I approach my thesis through a lens that, rather than being interdisciplinary, is informedly and intentionally undisciplined. This kind of approach, one that uses a creative praxis in order to unearth and attempt to move away from a universalizing academic modus operandi, is necessary to disavow the replication of the dynamics of flesh and humanness that I am trying to uncover. Indebted to thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Jasbir Puar, and Fred Moten, this thesis asks the question, what would it mean to be human in our own image, as the ones who are seen to be never quite human enough?

The thesis of Jenna Alexandra Taylor is approved.

Terence Keel

Alden Young

Ugo F. Edu, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

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Note on Arrival: A Record of a Joining; An Invitation.

I have noticed with a profound sense of hysteria that it is becoming increasingly impossible to write a Master's thesis—or do much of anything else—in this current iteration of the apocalypse. I care deeply about what I am going to share with you, but more and more these days I do not know why it matters. We are in a state of accelerated, slow collapse; everything is disintegrating around us and in the face of state violence, and viral violence, and quotidian slow-wearing-down violence, no container holds water. Everything is spilling everywhere. Everything worth holding is slipping out of reach, being torn from our hands. It is becoming harder and harder to deny that there is nothing left for us here, if any of us even had anything to begin with. In a particular way this thesis only makes sense in the context of the end of the world; as you engage with this work the reality that we are living through an apocalypse must be held close. It must be held close that, as Achille Mbembe reminds us, “At another level and for a large share of humanity, the end of the world has already occurred. The question is no longer to know how to live life while awaiting it; instead it is to know how living will be possible the day after the end, that is to say, how to live with loss, with separation.”¹ At base, and above all else, this thesis is about trying to find a way to wake up on the day after the end—a day that is simultaneously always to come and yet always already here—and keep on going. This thesis is about doing and imagining otherwise from where we are, entrenched in sites and systems of violence, in a place from whence, in all probability, there is no ‘out.’ This thesis is about making something we might want to keep at the end of the world.

In this introduction I want to do a close reading of two citations, the first of which comes from Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*: “We are aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967), 29

universe.”² In this reading I want to take Fanon seriously and at his word that we must completely lyse the entirety of this morbid universe, and moreover I want to think deeply about his word choices and their implications. In doing so, I hope to lead us not to a particular predestined conclusion, but to find something—something we could not have even known we were looking for at the outset—that we might want to keep. It is my hope that engaging in this close reading together will illuminate some part of what I am trying to do in this thesis; that this reading, in tandem with a close reading of a citation by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, will be something that can be returned to over the course of your engagement with this work and can act as a guide or a compass as you navigate these pages.

“We are aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid universe,” Fanon writes. While one might be tempted to read this citation as a polemic, in truth the only way we could ever construe it as such is if we willfully ignore the nature of coloniality that Fanon is trying to elucidate for us in this very citation. When he writes that we are aiming for a complete lysis of this *morbid universe*, he is trying to share with us, perhaps forcefully and urgently, the fact that there is nothing that coloniality has not touched. Coloniality is, to borrow Sylvia Wynter’s reading of Maturana and Varela, an autopoietic system.³ It is a self-creating and complete entity not limited to the act of colonization, but also encompassing self-sustaining and self-reproducing systems of knowing and being. As such, through this citation we learn that it is not simply enough to undo the act of colonization, to send the occupying force home and declare independence as an automatic return to a previous state of un-colonization. But rather, as Fanon informs us, “We shall see that another solution is possible. It implies restructuring the world.”⁴

² Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, xiv

³ Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter, Being Human as Praxis*, (Duke University Press, 2015) 28.

⁴ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 63

What we can read into this—Fanon’s use of the phrase ‘morbid universe’ rather than colonial situation, or colonization, or any number of other words he could have used—is that in stating that we are aiming for its complete lysis he is also implying that there is another universe out there for us. There is another universe that can be created or joined, another universe that we are capable of. Moreover, the citation itself is evidence of Fanon’s belief in multiplicity: Just as coloniality constitutes a morbid universe, just as coloniality is totalizing and autopoietic, so too can it be transcended. The act of lysing this morbid universe will disrupt fundamentally this self-reproducing and self-sustaining system; restructure it in such a way that it no longer resembles any part of the universe we had before. It is simultaneously irrevocable and multiplicitous; a continuance and a fundamental disruption. In order to read this citation generatively—and by that I mean in order to find something in this citation to hold on to at the end of the world—we must hold both things to be deeply true at the same time: there is no out from coloniality and there is another universe waiting for us, we are at the end of the world and we will wake up the day after the end.

This is a thesis about making connections, though not as fitting puzzle pieces together in service of creating a unified whole, but perhaps as a chance encounter that reverberates beyond an unrepeatable moment. As I will outline further on in this introduction, the concepts I am working with and through in this thesis might appear at times to be disparate, but it is my contention, following Fanon, that they constitute a particular type of morbid universe. The work of this thesis is not merely, or perhaps not even primarily, explaining a happening or elucidating a theory, but following the threads of connection: toggling back and forth from the gaseous particles of the star to the constellation, and from the constellation to the morbid universe. Rather than use the space of this thesis to produce or display knowledge or knowability, I wish to

partake in—and in partaking asking you the reader to join with me—an encircling or traveling of this particular morbid universe. And in this act of circumnavigation, this act of following the threads of connection without agenda or the intention of ending up at any predetermined conclusion, without the urge to make things fit or make things make sense or make anything at all, I hope to move towards lysis. In this vein I now want us to think with and through the idea of lysis—holding both the literal biological process and the metaphor Fanon might have meant it to be in order to imagine a way to break through the autopoietic and auto-instituting morbid universe with which we are confronted and which Fanon confronts us with.

The root of the word lysis comes from Greek, meaning, ‘to loosen,’ and this begs the question: what if we loosened our grip on this morbid universe, which would be by de facto, to loosen our grip on reality, on sanity, on the binary between reality and unreality, sanity and insanity? What if this morbid universe loosened its grip on us, by force, as if scalded? Much like lysis as a biological process, which we will approach in a moment, loosening seems to signal the liminal: it is an act towards separation but is not the act of separation itself. It is a movement without a destination; an act that by definition cannot be completed, but the possibility of completion, of revolution, comes rushing in at every turn. Following this line of thought, or perhaps provoked by this line of thought, what if, now having been loosened, we finally let go?

The biological process of cell lysis is one in which the outer membrane or wall of a eukaryotic cell is dissolved, releasing the organelles—the materials inside the cell, now called lysate—into the ether of the larger organism. Crucially, lysis is not cell death, but dissolution; it is a loosening and disambiguation of the organelles of the cell from their membranous container in such a way that what was once a cell can no longer be identified as such. In lysis the cell enters a state of liminal suspension that is simultaneously obliterative, a state that is both destructive and

that reroutes death. Lysis occurs by processes that both occur naturally in the wild, and are interventional: Wild lysis can be triggered by antibiotics against bacterial cells, or by viral particles that invade ‘healthy’ cells and then lyse in order to disseminate more viral particles within the organism. What I am calling ‘interventional lysis’ occurs during a process of what is called, ‘biomolecular analysis’; in order to access DNA, RNA, and mitochondrial DNA, as well as various types of proteins contained inside various types of eukaryotic cells, scientists have developed methods of instigating cell lysis in order to extract that which is contained within the cell membrane so that scientific work can be done.⁵

“We are aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid universe,” Fanon writes, and with this piece on lysis—on dissolution, and disambiguation, and a loosening, obliterative suspension—we can move towards a better felt sense of what he is trying to tell us. Can we understand the morbid universe of coloniality as a kind of cell membrane? As an autopoietic encircling of a complex internal doing and happening? And in our mind’s eye can we imagine its lysis—an irrevocable disruption to functioning, which is to say, to the violence of coloniality; a rupture to the encircling; a breaking of the circle? Lysis, in the way I understand Fanon to intend it, signals a moment of possibility. In this dissolution that is not death, in this breaking of the autopoietic circle, we are invited to unravel just as we are invited to continue. And it strikes me that there might be something profoundly generative in the simultaneity of these two counterposed movements, something that unlocks this lytic possibility. In a colonial universe that extols the imperative to uphold a structure as a mark of ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’ and instills an existential fear in that structure’s demise, an unraveling may be what we want, what we are aiming for. However, in the same way that cell lysis is not cell death, so too do we realize that as

⁵ Shehadul Islam, Mohammad et al., “A Review on Macroscale and Microscale Cell Lysis Methods” (*Micromachines*, 2017).

totalizing as the universe of coloniality is, there is always already something subversive, unruly, and undisciplined going on within it and underneath it—tender subterranean whispers in the night that we might want to keep. The autopoietic encircling only exists over and against enormous pressure from inside the circle. In this way we might move towards a felt sense that even as lysis is what we are aiming for, there is a way in which it was always already a foregone conclusion; there is another universe out there for us that is also already in us.

Saidiya Hartman writes in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* that, “This story is told from inside the circle,”⁶ signaling her desire to uproot the dynamic of remote historian observing historical actor, and instead valuing closeness as a scholarly method—not in the sense of over-identifying with a community that you do not belong to, but understanding that when you are marginalized in the academy the community you are ‘studying’ is often your own, is often yourself. Following in Hartman’s footsteps, I offer that this is a thesis written from inside the circle. Following in Hartman’s footsteps, I seek to be within a doing or a happening—though not as embedded in a population as an outsider in order to observe, study, (control, discipline), but rather in the way that I am already in something, we are already in this autopoietic morbid universe, seeking to lyse it. This thesis, simultaneously, is both a part of the process of being in something and also a record of that process. This thesis is a record of a joining with an always already ongoing doing and happening—though not as a marriage license, but perhaps as the telling of a story, for as Katherine McKittrick reminds us, “stories and storytelling signal the fictive work of theory.”⁷ Part of the story of this thesis is the fact that I arrive at my scholarly conclusions by ambulance, on a gurney, with a morphine drip. However, I wish to impress, quite forcefully, that this is not a work of ‘autotheory’ but rather a practice of citation that is oriented

⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, (W.W Norton and Company, 2019) xiv.

⁷ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, (Duke Press, 2021) 7.

around a particular felt sense of catharsis and rage. I am aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid universe.

In this thesis I will trace what Sylvia Wynter calls a “politics of being,”⁸ through multiple sites, modes of operating, and ontological schemas; wending my way through, picking up threads only to drop them and find them again later. The nave of this wheel is working on and through a politics of being that sites itself in the body, what Wynter calls a genre of humanness that threads together antiBlackness and what we might call the disabled body—though crucially (and to depart from what I will explicate as an ultranormative understanding of disability), this is a genre of humanness whereby antiBlackness operationalizes that which we might call disability. Under this ontological schema Blackness and disability cannot and should not be conceived as parallel phenomena of structural and/or personal discrimination and/or oppression. Rather, at stake here is the question, what makes ‘disability’ *mean*. My contention is that the answer is bound up in an antiBlack schema of the human.

One of the sites where this particular genre of humanness is consolidated, quite forcefully so, is biomedicine, and as such I move to put out a call for medical abolition. It is my contention that an antiBlack and ableist politics of being has rooted itself so deeply into biomedicine that reforming it—making individual doctors change their attitudes about race or disability, ‘improving health outcomes’ for Black women or any other marginalized group—is simply not possible. It is my contention that if we were to remove the ontologically antiBlack violence that underpins medicine it would be so fundamentally altered that we could no longer call it medicine.

Returning to Wynter, I argue that medicine erupted out of a certain ordering of the world and of bodies within that world in such a way that makes it not universal or natural, but culturally

⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” (*CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2003) 317.

specific to a certain time and place. Biomedicine is a white western ethnomedicine, and in this section I urge us to consider that as such its existence under this specific set of ontological conditions is not a foregone conclusion or *fait accompli*. It was made. And so it can be lysed—as a moment of possibility that provides an opening for it to be made again, differently.

I now want to pivot, in order to loop back around at a later date, towards a citation from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons*, “we’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anyone else.”⁹ They write, “But if we listen to them they will say: come, let’s plan something together. And that’s what we’re going to do. *We’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anyone else.*”¹⁰ On its face this citation is murky, opaque, (full, iterative). I can pinpoint exactly where the feeling this citation elicits resides in me but an analysis as such continues to feel elusive. And perhaps that is the point. This citation involves some kind of imperative and yet it is not prescriptive. It demands something of us but will not tell us what that something is. In a particular way, this citation lends the felt sense of swinging in the space between the two clauses, feeling the contradiction in them rub up against each other in a way that may be generative. We’re telling all of you/we’re not telling anyone else. I want to offer here that the point of this exercise is not to ‘understand’ this citation per se, or to perform some kind of labor that renders this citation understandable, but to allow this citation to take us somewhere; that the labor of this portion of the introduction is not in translation, but in a slow, meandering type of transportation.

This citation revolves around the act of telling: who must be told and who must remain untold, who deserves to know what is to be told and who is unworthy of hearing? From where does the telling emanate and to where does it disappear? Who is the mouth and who is the ear?

⁹ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013) 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

As we ask ourselves these questions we begin to realize, as Moten and Harney might have intended, that this is a slippery business. Implicit in this citation is both a sharing that must be done and a secret that must be kept, and, as Moten and Harney seem to be nebulously signaling to us, parsing one from the other is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, exceedingly urgent and yet also not the best use of our time, not the most relevant question.

In the context of this thesis the question of telling, of wanting to tell all of you but not anyone else, surfaces in the understanding that the practice of scholarship is predicated on a kind of telling. A kind of telling that easily and perhaps inevitably becomes a danger or poses a threat no matter how we attempt to position ourselves in relation to it. If we remove the impetus or compulsion to tell from the practice of scholarship it becomes clear how quickly the whole operation begins to lyse around us. What if you did a sociological study and failed to tell anyone what you found out? What if you went into the archives and came out empty-handed, your only notes being the memory of what that haunted space felt like? How that haunted space haunted you? What if we made a plan together and never acted on it? What if all we did in the graduate student lounge, in the faculty lounge, in the post-doc lounge, was make an endless series of plans that never came to fruition but nonetheless moved us somewhere, anywhere, away from here? Could such a bevy of untold doings be said to be scholarship? If we do this thing called scholarship and refuse to tell anyone but each other about it, what are we doing?

Once it becomes clear that the compulsion to tell is embedded quite forcefully into scholarly labor, it becomes equally clear that the directionality of that telling can only ever be upwards. When I say that we are compelled to tell someone about what we find, I mean that we are compelled to tell the institution, the university, the state, the nongovernmental organization. “The hospital talks to the prison which talks to the university which talks to the NGO which talks

to the corporation through governance,” Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write. “Everybody knows everything about our biopolitics.”¹¹ Telling in this context can only ever become a form of governance, a kind of synaptic relay race back and forth endlessly routed through these sites of which at best we should be wary and at worst we should understand as sites of explicit though sometimes covert violence. It becomes clear that in Moten and Harney’s thinking there are two circuits of telling, two circuits of relay at play here: there is a telling that necessarily involves the state no matter to what site it is first dispatched, a telling on each other to the state, a telling translated to policy, to governance, to the discipline. The second type of telling, which I am going to call sharing, is the thing we only do with each other; the thing we do around a campfire, in abandoned hallways constantly looking over our shoulder to make sure we are not overheard. It is the thing we do urgently, excitedly, out of love for each other and disdain for where we are; it is utopian, and hopeless, and never leads anywhere but back to us. It is far more and far other than merely relaying information, but a way of being and a mode of orientation. Sharing, as Katherine McKittrick reminds us, “is not understood as an act of disclosure but instead signals collaboration and collaborative ways to enact and engender struggle.”¹²

“We’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anyone else,” Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write, and in the rub of this lopsided contradiction we understand that sharing is impure and staying silent is impossible. To be in this circuit, to be shunted through the pneumatic tubes of the lecture hall, the public health official’s filing cabinet of records, the NGO’s open plan coworking space, is to be induced to tell. We will not get out of these spaces unscathed. Constructing a binary opposition of telling versus sharing, of telling versus silence is not a helpful or meaningful enterprise; because of the nature of what we are in we will not often or not

¹¹ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 57.

¹² McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 39

always or not ever get a choice—our agency is both our own and the property of whoever grants us the fellowship. Perhaps in its messy utopian impurity we can understand Moten and Harney’s nebulous imperative through Saidiya Hartman’s concept of practice: “Practice is, to use Michel de Certeau’s phrase, ‘a way of operating’ defined by ‘the non-autonomy of the field of action,’ internal manipulations of the established order, and ephemeral victories. The tactics that comprise the everyday practices of the dominated have neither the means to secure a territory outside the space of domination nor the power to keep or maintain what is won in surreptitious and necessarily incomplete victories.”¹³ Sharing, telling all of you but not anyone else, is a mode of survival and yet also an ephemeral and necessarily incomplete victory. It is somewhat akin to loosening in the sense that it is a forever incomplete action; it will never lead us to the revolution as an endpoint but in the constancy and futility of practice we are able to create a moment of possibility for ourselves. In using Hartman’s terminology here, which she conceives of in the context of enslavement, it is not my intention to dissolve the contextual specificity of the plantation in her formulation, but rather to signal that what we experience in Moten and Harney’s citation is in some way irrevocably tethered to the logic and historical reality of the plantation.

This is a thesis about method in the sense that in some fundamental way this thesis seeks to address the question, what are we doing? How do we practice? How do we plan together? I want to offer the idea that this is a piece of scholarship that is neither interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary, but scholarship that is informedly and intentionally undisciplined. By undisciplined scholarship I mean, what would it mean to lyse the discipline? To dissolve its borders and let the contents spill out, spill over? What if we were to dislocate ourselves in relation to the discipline to such an extreme that we no longer knew what a discipline even was

¹³ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America* (W.W Norton and Company, 2022) 84.

or where we stood in relation to it? In part this concern with disciplinary study is practical: I wish to talk about the viscosity of the body but I am not primarily interested in a domain such as queer theory; the meta-study of biomedicine is of huge concern to this thesis, but a field such as science studies or history of medicine does not often view this subject ontologically or come to the conclusion that abolition is what is needed; what we might call disability is a central site of inquiry but disability studies as an academic discipline is oriented entirely in the wrong direction. Moreover, I endeavor to view each of these sites together as an interconnected universe under the aegis of Black studies, however I remain tentative and uncertain as to whether this work in total is a work of Black studies scholarship *per se*.

Further, my felt sense of the matter is that to do what might be called disciplinary scholarship would be to accede to the morbid universe I am trying to understand. In the face of the fact that doing scholarly work is not enough, and may in truth not be anything at all, how do I fail to recreate a morbid universe in attempting to explicate or excavate it? As Saidiya Hartman asks us, “How do we revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?”¹⁴ Inhered in this project is not only an attempted move away from the grammar of violence of the morbid universe that may or may not lay buried alive in the discipline, but an attempt to join a grammar that is otherwise. This is not only, or perhaps not even primarily an attempt to avoid doing harm, but an attempt to practice something else, something other, to engage in a doing that might be unthinkable from within a discipline. Hartman continues, “Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody

¹⁴ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” (Small Axe, 2008) 4.

aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man.”¹⁵ *We’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anyone else.*

In this thesis I endeavor to explore language, addressing the ways in which the language we are given to talk about ‘disability’ by the academy forecloses a politics of being in favor of a phenomenon of identity. That is, this section seeks to understand an ultranormative strand of disability studies as foundationally white and phenomenological, traditionally favoring the study of a social experience of discrimination on an otherwise unmarked subject. I contend that what this does is render us unable to index ‘disability’ or ‘disabled bodies’ without referencing whiteness; ‘disabled’ in the context of an academic discipline is always already counterposed to any discussion of Blackness or race. This combination of a phenomenological approach and inherently white subject formation then operationalizes a formulation whereby experience and identity become untethered to structure and genealogy, and ‘being disabled’ can be said to be ‘like’ ‘being Black’ on the basis that both social groups (construed to be mutually exclusive), share an experience of discrimination and exclusion. This section looks for a way out, though perhaps not by way of finding an exit as much as by digging a tunnel underneath.

I then fan outwards, the thread of this particular kind of language leading us to its site of consolidation and circulation: the western university. In picking up this thread we also re-join with our earlier thread on an ontology of being, or the politics of being and humanness. This section seeks to dislocate us from the western university from within, asking us to ask ourselves and everyone we know: why is it that we do this thing called scholarship this way? What are we doing when we engage in it, and what is it doing to us? It is my assertion that at stake in a scholarly doing—the creation of studiable populations, the production of knowledge that is both about and done unto these studiable populations, and the circulation of that knowledge through

¹⁵ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

these academic, state, and corporate channels that slip over one another by design—is the politics of being that Sylvia Wynter points us towards in her work; the production of humanness as a worked-on and worked-over category in a way that bears particularly and forcefully on Black, and by extension ‘disabled’ bodies. There is an ontology and epistemology of being at work in the academy that is insidiously circulating in the groundwater and circumventing our best intentions and the question then becomes, what is there to do about it? In the face of it?

By introducing the thesis this way I hope to give you multiple doors through which to enter, multiple opportunities to join in to this happening. I want to lay out all the threads and invite you to pick up and follow the ones that make most sense for you. I invite you to be in the thick of something, to be in the thick of it with me—even if you are not totally sure of what exactly it is we are in the thick of together—and I ask you to suspend, at least for a moment, a temptation towards dismissal in the face of encountering something that asks you to dislocate yourself from a more familiar mode of sense-making. By working the sites of this thesis through citations by Frantz Fanon and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney respectively, I hope to give you multiple other lenses to view and make sense of these ideas, and to introduce the mode of working and manner of moving that I plan to employ. To loop back around to the very beginning, to return to an earlier thread, I hope in the method of this work to prefigure the apocalypse, which is to say I hope to find a way to discern—if only for myself—what stays and what can no longer be carried, what is killing us and what we want to keep.

Towards a Politics of Being.

In this section I will be discussing bodies and discussing flesh and the politics therein—of having a body and being enfleshed. In this section I will be making a concerted effort to not

evacuate the viscerality of the body in favor of a discursive reading. However, the goal is neither to lose ourselves in our bodies, detaching an embodied experience from the structural, discursive, and political reality of enfleshment. Moreover, the goal is not necessarily to toggle back and forth between two different registers, from ‘micro’ to ‘macro,’ but to hold both at once and conceive of them as inseparable and coterminous, rather than as distinct.

It is my contention and my reality that we live the discursive in the flesh; the truth of what can be seen, known, felt, and experienced in and as a body is layered and injected with something that is more-than-body: my body and its discursive meaning and five hundred years of the history of medicine and the plantation and the capitalist imperative towards productivity and the protestant work ethic are all in the doctor’s examination room with me. They are all operative. My felt sense of my self is conditioned by both sensation and structure. Moreover, a body-as-theory approach undertaken by some queer theorists, for example, can only ever be theorized from the position of the particular body doing the theorizing as the only experience we have with the visceral is our own. This can become a myopic, if not dangerous way to do theory. This approach forecloses an understanding of the way structures of power and domination move and mutate, coming to bear on bodies outside of their immediate target, so to speak.

For example and as I will argue later in this section, what ‘disability’ has been made to mean in the particular structures of power and domination under which we live is predicated on an antiBlack ontology of humanness. Put differently, what ‘disability’ has been made to mean occurs in a morbid universe that antiBlackness hath wrought and I, as a white disabled theorist, could not come to this conclusion using my own body as the sole fundament for theorizing, though my own body is never far away from this work. My methodological desire to lose neither the body nor the discursive structures in which the body exists, to render the body neither a

theoretical abstraction nor the grounds for ‘autotheory,’ is a reflection of a need for a type of (undisciplined, unruly) scholarship that is grounded or informed, with subversive intention, in one’s own self, but crucially does not stop there, rather putting oneself in conversation as a multi-sited study.

In this section I will be working closely with scholar Sylvia Wynter’s work, focusing not only on her ideas, but on the methodologies that can be gleaned from them, the pathways she lays out for us that can help us understand not just what to think about the human, but how to think about humanness. While her work on humanness is far-ranging in scope, I will be focusing specifically on her piece from 2003 entitled, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” In tracking her ideas, I hope to carve out a space for ourselves in the human. To do this I will be picking up just two of Wynter’s threads. First, I am interested in the ways in which she articulates the similarities and divergences between herself and Michel Foucault’s work, and I will use this articulation to fashion a dialectic of sorts between the continuous and the discontinuous. I will also pick up on her phrase, ‘the politics of being’; using its ripples and echoes to help us understand some aspect of humanness and the body.

I will then retrace Wynter’s steps through these turns of humanness that she outlines in “Unsettling the Coloniality” to help us understand—an understanding gained by moving with her movement—that the human as a conceptual container for the ‘truth’ of what we are has been in constant upheaval. In fact, if we are taking the long view perhaps the only constant of what it means to be human is that it is constantly being ruptured, pierced, morphed, and transmuted. The exceptional nature of Wynter’s work is in its ability to dislocate us and disorient us from the given in the concepts we use and the language we use to to deploy these concepts, and yet

simultaneously, just as we are intentionally rendered conceptually dislocated in her theory, we are able to regain a sense of place by her meticulous and wide-ranging practice of citation. I will focus on what Wynter calls the ‘biocentric conception of man,’ and particularly the move to enfleshment that such a conception entails in order to approach what might be called disability through Wynter’s methodology and conceptual framing. In other words, I want to hone in on the moment when the human was made flesh—no longer being conceived of through what Wynter calls the ‘adaptive truth-for’ of ‘rationality’—and tinker in this tension point, locating the way the body has been worked on by particular regimes of knowing and being to create particular regimes of humanity and unhumanity.

To close this section I wish to pose the question of, if the only constant of the definition of humanness is its discontinuity, how can we hack that for ourselves? In the sense that Legacy Russell contends in *Glitch Feminism* that, “the glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest. This failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us is a pointed and necessary refusal”¹⁶ If the human has been a constant rupture, a constant wound, being sutured and reopened by coloniality and structures of antiBlackness and by ableist dictates of form and function at the intersection of value, and if we constantly and consistently have been failed by the human, how can we burrow into this wound and create a place for ourselves? How can we become human in our own image? As beings that were always already other than, outside of, and beyond the human anyway? What possibilities of being and becoming manifest for us? Crucially, this is not intended to be a polemic against the human, a manifesto in which refusing the human is positioned as the ‘way out,’ but is rather an acknowledgement that this is what we have to work with, this is where we are. Rather than

¹⁶ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2020) 11.

conceiving of flight as ‘out,’ might we conceive of it as tunneling deeper? Is there some opening that we can refashion for ourselves as something that is worth keeping?

“As Christian becomes Man1 (as political subject), then as Man1 becomes Man2 (as a bio-economic subject), from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, each of these new descriptive statements will nevertheless remain inscribed within the framework of a specific secularizing formulation of that matrix of Judeo-Christian Grand Narrative,” Sylvia Wynter writes. “With this coming to mean that, in both cases their epistemes will be, like their respective genres of being human, both discontinuous and continuous.”¹⁷ Similarly in some respects to poststructural philosopher Michel Foucault’s scholarship, the core of Wynter’s work is tracking, meticulously and obsessively, the shifts in the way that we have understood the human—from a Christian conception of the human to what she calls Man1 and Man2. For Wynter, these formulations and the ways in which they morph are always dialectical: of importance is not only what constitutes the human in any particular episteme, but what is excluded from the human, how the human is constructed in the shadow of its other and how the human is wholly incomplete or incomprehensible without its non/in/un human counterpart. In her own articulation of her departure from Foucault’s framework of ‘epistemes,’ Wynter states that while Foucault conceived of epistemes as essentially discontinuous from one another, she believes, as illustrated in the above citation, there are crucial moments of continuation, ways of knowing and being that must be carried over from prior conceptions of the human in order for the concept of the human to continue to be operationalized.

Put differently, something essential is being recycled or refracted at the same moment as something is being ruptured. In this way we might understand Wynter’s contention as a kind of dissolution that is not death, a lytic restructuring that by turns creates something that is

¹⁷ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 318.

fundamentally different and yet simultaneously retains something of its component parts. Multiple things pushing in tension on each other are happening at once. As Wynter writes, “what he [Foucault] oversaw was that such a discontinuity that had been effected by the classical episteme itself, was taking place in terms of a continuous cultural field, one instituted by the matrix Judeo-Christian formulation of a general order of existence.”¹⁸ Iterations of humanness that occurred subsequent to a Christian conception erupted in a cultural field in which the Christian had at one time been operative—rendering the phrasing, ‘had at one time’ lopsided, incomplete, and not quite right, as the fact that the Christian had at one time been operative renders it in some way operative still according to Wynter’s formulation. The idea of a complete conceptual departure runs in some way counter to the working of time and memory, to a cultural field that as Wynter so rightly points out is characterized just as much by its continuity as by its breaks and ruptures.

In working with and through Wynter’s departure from Foucault, we learn two things that might be worth holding on to. Firstly, in the distinction Wynter explicates there emerges a kind of dialectic between the continuous and the discontinuous, between continuity and rupture, that offers us a roadmap for how we might approach the concept of humanness. We are working on multiple valences at once, holding multiple things together in tension. The methodology is to hold the fullness and the heaviness of both, attending to a kind of sense-making that does not always make sense. The utility of viewing the human through this dialectic is that it helps us understand that humanness, both as it has been conceived by coloniality and how we may choose to conceive of it, is so deeply multiple that its articulation may not always be easy or entirely possible.

¹⁸ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 317.

Secondly, when we understand the human as a category that has been continually ruptured, that has been in constant upheaval and transmutation, we are able to dislocate ourselves in relation to it, seeing this conceptual container as something not grounded in any kind of immutable scientific, philosophical, or cultural truth; that what it means to be human has always arisen out of a particular cultural and societal order. Unmooring ourselves, we are able to see the ways in which what our bodies and our humanness has come to mean is inflected with and instantiated by power—as in coloniality, antiBlackness, the institution and deployment of nation-states, a hegemonically Western conception and enforcement of a gender binary, capitalism as an extension of the plantation, and ableism as a certain valuation of bodily forms and functions under a colonial, antiBlack, and capitalist society. As such, we must come to the conclusion that our humanness or our exclusion from its sphere of influence is not natural but made, and therefore it can be made differently, in our own image.

The second portion of this section's armature is what Sylvia Wynter calls, a 'politics of being,' of which she writes, "these shifts in episteme were not only shifts with respect to each episteme's specific order of knowledge/truth, but were also shifts in what can now be identified as the 'politics of being': that is, as a politics that is everywhere fought over what is to be the descriptive statement, the governing sociogenic principle, instituting each genre of the human."¹⁹ Wynter's use of the terminology, 'politics of being' points us to the fact that orders of truth and knowledge are not exactly coterminous with regimes of being, though they are not exactly mutually exclusive either. A solely epistemological framework does not register the ways that the construction of truth is brought to bear on the being-ness of bodies, or the way that orders of truth were *everywhere fought over*, including over how we come to know our being and construct the idea of the self, our selves.

¹⁹ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality," 317.

Every moment of this thesis is concerned with a politics of being in the sense that every moment of this thesis is concerned with the tools we have been given and the means by which we have been allowed to elaborate what it means to be, where we hear the whispers and echoes of this constrained and contorted elaboration, and how we can possibly re-elaborate our being otherwise; how we can everywhere stage a fight over what is to be the descriptive statement, the governing sociogenic principle. Bringing together the cyclical both/and nature of continuity and rupture inherent in the historical turns of genres of humanness with the concept of a politics of being forms a prism through which to view this section. Through it we are able to see the ways in which the current genre of humanness we find ourselves in, or excluded from, has been birthed out of many historical moments that themselves have been pulled through to the present, while at the same time understanding that this history does not form a straight line. Moreover we are able to understand that these rupturally continuous descriptive statements can be found everywhere we look, both in the ways we conceive of ourselves and the ways we conceive of institutions. Therefore they must be fought everywhere. Wynter herself reminds us, “the struggle of our new millennium will be the one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being and therefore that full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.”²⁰

For Wynter, the grounds of a western conception of the human lie foundationally in a Judeo-Christian world order. In this medieval iteration, the dividing line between human and other lies between the clergy and the laity, the saved and the fallen, Christ worshippers and Christ refusers. As Wynter explains, “the medieval world’s idea of order [was] based on degrees

²⁰ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 260.

of spiritual perfection/imperfection, an idea of order centered on the Church.”²¹ An ontology of order was understood through the Bible as a literal guiding document and its interpretations by the Church, an ontology that as a politics of being came to bear on both who fell into these degrees of spiritual perfection and who remained biblically disordered, and how one understood the entire world as they knew it. Wynter writes, “the geography of the earth had also had to be known in parallel Spirit/Flesh terms as being divided up between, on the one hand, its temperate regions centered on Jerusalem—regions that, because held up above the element of water by God’s Providential Grace, were habitable—and, on the other, those realms that, because outside this Grace, had to be uninhabitable.”²² This Judeo-Christian order of humanness was not only mapped onto bodies but space as well, forming a literal worldview rather than merely a way to know and classify people/bodies. From this, we can already see how a theocentric conception of the human lends itself to coloniality as a ‘natural’ expression of Christian order: there are those who, not adhering to a Christian worldview—a worldview that is highly culturally specific and yet conceived as absolutely universal—fall outside of ‘spiritual perfection’ and therefore are ‘naturally’ able to be colonized by the spiritually superior Europeans. Additionally, because the lands that the fallen and ‘spiritually inferior’ occupy are said to be ‘uninhabitable,’ they are therefore simply uninhabited, empty, ripe for extraction regardless of who is already there.

A shift in the theocentric descriptive statement of the human comes, according to Wynter, through a distinction that must be made in order to continue rationalizing colonial conquest: between those that have refused Christ, and those who, having never heard the word of God, could not be said to be refusing Christ per se. Wynter writes, “the indigenous peoples of the New World could not be classified as Enemies-of-Christ, since Christ’s apostles had never

²¹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 288.

²² Ibid 279.

reached the New World... Which meant that because they could not have ever refused to hear the Word, they could not (within the terms of the orthodox theology of the Church), be classified as Christ-Refusers, their lands justly taken, and they themselves enslaved and/or enserfed.”²³ In other words, once Europe found a loophole in its own logic, the logic had to change in order to continue to uphold the binary of self and Other, human and nonhuman that enabled the subjugation of indigenous peoples. A shift away from the Church as the source of world order was necessary for the newly emergent world order of coloniality to carry on as planned.

What this meant was that a new ordering force, a new politics of being had to emerge, though crucially this ‘new’ ordering force was closely mapped onto the previous one, moving forward not by breaks as Foucault contends but by slippages and multidirectional sliding. Wynter describes, “Man was to be invented in its first form as the rational political subject of the state, as one who displayed his reason by primarily adhering to the laws of the state—rather than, as before, in seeking to redeem himself from enslavement to Original Sin by primarily adhering to the prohibitions of the Church.”²⁴ Here, rationality as a politics of being conceptualized in and through the state comes to replace degrees of spiritual perfection, though crucially they both function in the same position as an arbiter of who falls into acceptable modes of being and who falls outside of them. In a colonial context, this meant that the indigenous peoples of the African continent and the ‘Americas’ could not be construed as rational because they were not in possession of the kind of sovereign state formation that Europe took to be the universal (and therefore of the ultimate good) norm. This, crucially, was deeply bound up in processes of racialization and the continued formulation of the visibly Other non-human, un-sovereign, and therefore easily and rightfully dominated. In an intra-European context, rationality was withheld

²³ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 293.

²⁴ Ibid 277.

from the poor, the Mad, the invalid, and the criminal, as they posed an internal threat to an emergent capitalist conception of sovereignty and to the authority of the state.

On this point Wynter writes, “inside Europe, the increasingly interned figure of the Mad would itself come to function...as the signifier of the ‘significant ill’ of a threatened enslavement to irrationality in the reoccupied place of the medieval Leper, whose figure, in a parallel way to that of the ‘Negro,’ had served as the intra-Christian-European signifier of the then ‘significant ill’ of enslavement to Original Sin.”²⁵ It is here that we can begin to see the forward-and-back motion of this forward movement in greater detail. The idea that there must be a ‘significant ill’ operative in European society—helping to form what it means to be rational, law-abiding, and therefore properly human, whether this applied internally within European peoples or externally to the regions being colonized at an ever faster and more violent rate—is pulled forward from a Judeo-Christian worldview to what Sylvia Wynter calls a “Man1” worldview centered around the ultimate good of a state and its ideally rational citizens. Who counts as Man and what formations of the world count as ‘right’ (universal, emanating from Europe, justifying European/white supremacy) have not so much been fundamentally changed but fundamentally laundered.

Additionally, Wynter’s thinking in the above citation bears interestingly, though perhaps not entirely clearly, on this question of body, ontology, disability and Blackness that we have been following thus far. She explains that the figure of the Mad comes to replace the figure of the medieval leper as representing the ultimate ‘significant ill,’ once Original Sin and now irrationality. She then uses the wording, “in a parallel way to the ‘Negro’”²⁶ as in, Black folks—primarily at that point being enslaved and taken from the African continent—acted as an ontological parallel to the ‘significant ill’ of the leper and consequently the Mad. This, in my

²⁵ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 304.

²⁶ Ibid.

reading of Wynter's articulation, seems to do two things simultaneously that exist in some sort of tension with one another. Firstly, her thinking seems to concatenate in an ontological sense the figure of the Black with the figure of the Mad or the leper; they occupy similar ontological positions within a European/white supremacist, Judeo-Christian, rationality-driven world order. They signify and embody the Other, allowing Man to be constructed in the light that is only made meaningful by the Other's shadow—as Wynter writes, the West came to, “invent, label, and institutionalize the indigenous peoples of the Americas as well as the transported enslaved Black Africans as the physical referent of the projected irrational/subrational Human Other to its civic-humanist, rational self-conception.”²⁷

However, Wynter's use of the word, ‘parallel’ in this citation would seem to imply that on the level of embodiment, those that are racialized as Black in this schema cannot also be literally mentally ill or suffer from leprosy because on an ontological level to be Black is to be Mad. The ontological equivocation forecloses a Black embodied experience of mental illness, physical illness, or ‘disability’—the *figure* of the Black and the *figure* of the Mad as discursive abstractions in Wynter's thinking are made parallel, meaning that ontologically speaking they are never to touch, they are held as somehow separate and distinct embodied phenomena. Whether or not we believe Wynter on this point aside, her logic bears interestingly on a normative disability studies approach that I will be discussing in a later section which takes the ‘unmarked’ (white) disabled body as the ultimate norm in such a way as to render ‘Black’ and ‘disabled’ as mutually exclusive (and perhaps even mutually counterposed) terms. Wynter's conception of the figure of the Black and the figure of the Mad as parallel, with the figure of the Mad as a European (white) formation would seem to track with the figure of the disabled person as fundamentally white in a disability studies milieu. However, the way she places the Mad and the

²⁷ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 282.

Black ontologically in conversation with one another might create an opening or a thread that we can pick up and follow somewhere else.

The final turn of humanness that Wynter describes in “Unsettling the Coloniality,” is a, “redescription by means of which the still hybridly religio-secular political conception of the human, Man...was redefined as optimally economic Man, at the same time as this Man was redefined by Darwin as a purely biological being whose origin, like that of all other species, was sited in Evolution, with the human therefore existing in a line of pure continuity with all other organic forms of life.”²⁸ Put differently, the nineteenth century brought about a shift—perhaps better conceptualized as a continuous/discontinuous laundering—whereby Man (described by Wynter as Man2 as opposed to the rationally defined Man1), came to be understood both in terms of a discrete economic unit in a capitalist mechanism, but also biologically in Darwinian bio-evolutionary terms. Of this economic aspect of Man2, Wynter writes, “Man2 is now defined as a jobholding Breadwinner, and even more optimally, as a successful ‘masterer of Natural Scarcity’ (Investor, or capital accumulator),”²⁹ and rather than enslavement to Original Sin or irrationality, “enslavement is now to the threat of Malthusian overpopulation, to its concomitant ‘ill’ of Natural Scarcity whose imperative ‘plan of salvation’ would now be postulated in economic terms as that of keeping this at bay.”³⁰ In this rendering Man who is properly human is Man who can pull himself up by the bootstraps, play the stock market, and accumulate (both things and people). Breadwinner Man2 as a schematic of who is rightly and properly human is also projected out onto the ‘geography’ of capitalism, assuming that there is some kind of level

²⁸ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 314.

²⁹ Ibid 321.

³⁰ Ibid 320.

playing field on which to accumulate—a level ground under which antiBlackness, misogyny, and ableism are conveniently buried.

Of deeper interest to me in Wynter’s formulation of Man2 is the ways in which, in Wynter’s words, “the new master code of the bourgeoisie and of its ethnoclass conception of the human—that is, the code of selected by Evolution/dysselected by Evolution—was now to be mapped and anchored on to the only available ‘objective set of facts’ that remained.”³¹ In this conception the only available objective set of facts that remained resided in and as the body. While rationality as the universally aspired-to good could in theory be achieved by anyone granted they practice the correct modes of rationality and citizenship, humanness in a Man2 definition, anchored in a biological/Darwinian conceptual schema, could be literally seen on the body and therefore was made to be immutable and irrefutable. On this point Wynter elaborates, “this was the set of environmentally, climactically determined phenotypical differences between human hereditary variations as these had developed in the wake of the human diaspora both across and out of the continent of Africa that is, as a set of (so to speak) totemic differences, which were now harnessed to the task of projecting the Color Line drawn institutionally and discursively between whites/nonwhites,”³² and furthermore that, “[the] projection of genetic nonhomogeneity that would now be made to function, analogically, as the status-ordering principle based upon ostensibly differential degrees of evolutionary selectedness/eugenicity and/or dysselectedness/dysgenicity.”³³

In other words, these observable—whether on the surface of the body, or, as we will turn to in a moment, within the space of the body—differences are totemic in the sense that they come

³¹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality” 315.

³² *Ibid* 315.

³³ *Ibid* 316.

to mean something; they are as Wynter puts it, a marker of selectedness or dysselectedness. To place this back into the Malthusian economic terms that Wynter also claims engenders Man2, who will be able to become a ‘masterer of Natural Scarcity’ is already predetermined in a Darwinian evolutionary sense by these totemic differences. Differences—here construed by Wynter as racial(ized) differences—seen in and on the body come to *mean*, come to have ontological significance and come to bear on who will dispose and who will be disposed. Again we can see the continuous discontinuity in this formulation in the way that a (racialized) Other is necessary in order for eugenicity to be legible as that which is ‘universally’ right and good. We also see a fundamental shift in the way that humanness now is understood as something fixed in and on the body, something visible and demonstrable rather than something that can be possessed (correct Christian spirituality, rationality, sovereignty over the Self, etc).

It is on this final point that I wish to make an argument slightly beyond, though not necessarily in departure from, Wynter’s original work: that in the shift towards a Man2 conception of the human that came in the nineteenth century, humanness moved into the body and became enfleshed. Put differently, evidence of who did not or could not count properly as Man was something that could be seen on or found in the body; dysgenicity could be proven, as by science. In this way, it is hardly a coincidence that the development of modern medical science—as the development of ways and means of opening up the (marked) body and making its dysselection visible to Man—occurred coterminously with this shift towards a biocentric and Malthusian economic Man2. In *The Birth of the Clinic* philosopher Michel Foucault writes that, “The clinical gaze is a gaze that burns things to their furthest truth.”³⁴ Foucault’s clinical gaze, which I would argue is also fundamentally a racial/izing gaze reveals the furthest ‘truth’ of

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, (Routledge, 2010) 120.

dysgenicity and dysselection in the space of the body, enfleshing a worldview and set of beliefs about who was able to be properly human, that is, properly Man.

As an aside that I believe should go in the body of this thesis rather than in the footnotes, Foucault himself would certainly never conceive of the clinical gaze as racial/izing, and on this point C. Riley Snorton presciently remarks in his text *Black on Both Sides*, that this is evodence of, “Foucault’s failure to connect racialization to power’s procedural efficacies.”³⁵ Snorton also writes that, “Foucault overlooks how race functions as a necessary prefix to the particulates of his compound term (‘power-knowledge’), altering knowledge and power.”³⁶ My use of Foucault in the above paragraph to index the new visual aspect of dysselection, the idea that dysselection was a ‘marking’ that could be uncovered by the gaze, and that the body a crucial new site towards which the gaze was directed must be understood through a grammar of race and of racialization in order for the citation to make any sense at all. Any use of Foucault in this context must in a sense be intertextual or qualified, and a failure to do this renders the citation grossly out of place to the point of meaninglessness.

To return to our main thread, the enfleshment of Man or more specifically the enfleshment of the dysselected Other to Man as what is naturally selected by evolution and the market, provides us an opening for thinking Blackness and what we might call disability together—not as an additive process, or as seeking the ‘intersection’ between two discrete or distinct phenomenon, but as foundationally implicated in each other’s ontology. When Wynter describes the emergence of Man2 and its ontological implications, she is clear that the Other to Man2 is inherently and foundationally a racialized Other, writing, “The Color Line was now projected as the new ‘space of Otherness’ principle of nonhomogeneity, made to reoccupy the

³⁵ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, (University of Minnesota, 2017) 39.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

earlier places of the motion-filled heavens/non-moving Earth, rational humans/irrational animal lines and to recode in new terms their ostensible extrahumanly determined differences of ontological substance.”³⁷ That which was enfleshed in the body, and allegedly could be found in the body as a physiological reality, was first and foremost evidence of the Color Line; Black bodies were de facto different (Other, pathological, tainted) and this could not only be seen on the body as phenotype but constituted a biological fact with medical implications (for more on this see Rana Hogarth’s *Medicalizing Blackness*).

It is crucial to stress the racial/izing dimension of Man2 and the ways that the criteria for Man2 came to be located in the body because my thinking about an ontological concatenation between Blackness and disability is dependent on a specific order of operations, so to speak. It is my contention that disability as an ontology by which certain bodies are marked as pathological both biologically, functionally, and societally is dependent upon the racial/izing of the visceral body that was the hallmark of Man2’s schema of humanness. Put differently, an ideological schema of ableism that came to be sutured into humanness could not exist without the antiBlackness inherent in who counted as Man and who did not. AntiBlackness was a necessary precondition for an ontology of disability/ableism to be realized. As we will examine in a later section, while a normative discussion of ‘disability’ has sought to contextualize disability historically, it is completely divorced from historical processes of race/racialization. When it does address race, race and disability are conceived as being completely distinct processes. By teasing apart Sylvia Wynter’s Man2 and understanding the ways in which the historical shift to Man2 entails the enfleshment of humanness—a movement of the criteria for selection/dysselection into the flesh of the body in such a way that gave rise to a scientific and professional obsession with viewing the inside of the body and ‘finding’ ‘proof’ of dysselection

³⁷ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 316.

within—we are able to create a space for the conversation of what might be called disability and the conversation of race/racialization to be had simultaneously. To be clear, the creation of this space is not an attempt to find an ‘intersection’ between two distinct ontological processes, but to understand the ways in which these processes unfold coterminously (messily, non-additively, in excess of the intersection) and are imbricated deeply and irrevocably in one another.

To close this section, to lay this thread down in order to pick up the next, I want to imagine—or maybe just prefigure what such an imagining would look and feel like—something other. Sylvia Wynter writes, “one cannot ‘unsettle’ the ‘coloniality of power’ without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation.”³⁸ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson in her text *Becoming Human*, writes, “If an essential feature of your existence is that the norm is not able to take hold, what mode of being becomes available, and what mode might you invent?”³⁹ To return to a citation from Legacy Russell’s *Glitch Feminism* used at the opening of this chapter, “the glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest. This failure to function within the confines of a society that fails us is a pointed and necessary refusal.”⁴⁰ Figuring Sylvia Wynter’s both continuous and discontinuous rupturing of the human in the way that Legacy Russell figures ‘the glitch,’ how can we refashion our own failure to be selected, a failure to properly function as Man, in order to create a fissure that heralds new possibilities of being? If the norm of Man is not able to take hold, what ways of existence might we invent? Put slightly differently, might we think about the present descriptive statement of the human as constitutive of Fanon’s morbid universe and therefore in need of lysing?

³⁸ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 268.

³⁹ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human Matter and Meaning in an AntiBlack World* (NYU Press, 2020) 66.

⁴⁰ Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 11.

I want to put forth that the task at hand is not to refashion dysselection as selection, in other words, to alter the descriptive statement of the human into one that we think better ‘represents’ or ‘includes’ who and what ‘we’ are. Nor do I believe that ‘existence is resistance’ in the sense that merely existing as a member of the dysselected automatically translates into a radical, liberatory, or lytic politics. I also do not think simply embracing or reclaiming a dysselected status in the service of a radical politics is necessarily the answer either when Man comes to bear on us so forcefully and so violently and through so many different channels of institutional life. What I want to put forth is the idea that in this movement towards the lysis of Man, of the present descriptive statement of the human that has taken root in our bodies without our knowledge or consent, we cannot know the outcome ahead of time. We cannot fathom what a redescription of the human could be under these current terms and so therefore in our doing towards lysis, in a lytic process of inventing other modes of existence, in the glitch, we must hold close an uncertain and unforeseeable outcome and let it be that this is the most generative path in any direction.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write in *The Undercommons* that “I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice.”⁴¹ I want to put forth the idea that lysing humanness is a speculative practice done in concert with others, a practice that is simultaneously enacted in the broad and the macro (a riot comes to mind here), and the quotidian and interstitial (as sharing a meal, an insulin prescription, a dance, a place to stay awhile but not forever). Whatever the valence on which we enact this otherwise politics of being, the doing that we are doing right now is an end to itself just as we hope and imagine that this lytic doing leads us to something

⁴¹ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 110.

otherwise, even when that otherwise can never be known or planned for in advance of its coming. Perhaps the point I have been trying to circle around in this conclusion could be better said and more simply put by Fanon: “In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself.”⁴²

Disability Studies and the Language of the Ultranormative.

“If the lexicographical information is relevant,” Lennard Davis writes in the introduction to the *Disability Studies Reader, 5th edition*, “it is possible to date the coming into consciousness in English of the idea of ‘the norm’ over the period 1840-1860.”⁴³ He further writes that, “the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society. Recent work on the ancient Greeks, on preindustrial Europe, and on tribal peoples, for example, shows that disability was once regarded very differently from the way it is now.”⁴⁴ While the *Disability Studies Reader, 5th edition* came out in 2017, and there has been myriad disability scholarship since that is far more creative, nuanced and critical than the works I will be examining in this section of the thesis, I wish to hone in on this particular brand of disability studies that I will call ‘ultranormative’ in order to demonstrate the ways in which the ‘origin story’ or foundation of the discipline is still visible and operative in ways that I contend continues to inform the epistemological framing of the discipline, even as certain scholars such as Sami Schalk are doing the work to reframe disability studies otherwise. As the article by Lennard Davis, entitled “Disability, Normality, and Power” was the article chosen to introduce the *Disability Studies Reader* we can assume that at the time of publication that this article, and

⁴² Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 204.

⁴³ Lennard Davis, “Disability, Normality, and Power,” (Routledge, 2017) 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

this type of scholarly inquiry more broadly was meant to be archetypally representative of the type of scholarship being done in the discipline. By doing a close reading of both what is said and not said in the two above citations as an example of ultranormative disability studies scholarship, I hope to introduce the stakes of picking up this current thread.

Davis informs us that, “if the lexicographical information is relevant,” the concept of the norm (the topic of this article, very broadly speaking, is to trace the concept of ‘the norm’ in order to argue that it is not an extra-humanly made concept and therefore can and must shift to incorporate disabled people within it), began to become operative in English between 1840 and 1860. Two things unsaid in this assertion speak far louder than anything written in the claim: the first has to do with the assumption of location and universality. His use of the qualifier “in English,” is supposed to function as an obvious signpost, almost taken for granted, of context and location—and it certainly does, though perhaps not in the way he intends. Given the time period he is naming (which we will examine more closely in a moment), an English lexicon is explicitly a colonial lexicon, an imperial lexicon, a lexicon of domination and dispossession. Given that this article does not evolve into a comparative history of the concept of the norm and its lexicology, this omission signals that Davis believes that an English lexicon is universal, universally applicable, and neutral; that the qualifier “in English,” merits no further investigation or discussion. By consequence, this means that the disability that Davis will go on to examine in the article is also “in English,”—that is, insinuating a Western European/North American geographic locus without stating so explicitly, and therefore excluding most of the world from his analysis, and additionally somewhat ironically lacking any analysis of the domination and dispossession inhered in an English/non-English speaking divide, given that the article title explicitly names “power” as something that will be discussed.

To return to the question of the time period Davis mentions, the years 1840 through 1860 seem so obviously loaded as to be practically jumping off the page—particularly on the heels of our examination of Sylvia Wynter’s work—but again Davis does not factor in their implication into his analysis in any meaningful way, and it becomes almost a throwaway. Assuming that he is referring to either the United States or Western Europe during this time period, this places us chronologically speaking at the height of enslavement. To mention this time period, one in which the violently world-shaping system of chattel slavery and the transatlantic slave trade was deeply embedded and influential to the world view of English speakers, a time period in which chattel slavery and the plantation *were the norm*, and not think that this was relevant to the lexicographical information, is at best woefully inadequate scholarship. To name a time period and a location out of which the concept you are examining springs, and not examine the historical context, especially when that historical context is something as foundational as enslavement, is a totally incomplete examination. I contend that an omission of this kind is an example par excellence of the way that conversations on race and racialization become foreclosed in an ultranormative disability studies milieu.

On the issue of the second citation—“the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society. Recent work on the ancient Greeks, on preindustrial Europe, and on tribal peoples, for example, shows that disability was once regarded very differently from the way it is now”⁴⁵—the sentence seems to hinge on the phrase *a certain kind of society*. The object of this article is to understand the ways in which (in an *almost* Wynterian fashion) the idea of the ‘norm’ is not, as Davis puts it, a condition of human nature, but is rather culturally specific and therefore is mutable—a quality of a certain kind of society rather than a universal, extrahumanly ordained truth. Using this argumentation Davis leads us to

⁴⁵ Davis, “Disability, Normality, and Power,” 2.

the idea that the discriminatory reality of disabled people falling outside of the current idea of the norm needs to be challenged in order to create a more inclusive, ostensibly diverse, norm. In making this claim Davis briefly discusses the concept of eugenics and Quatelet's '*l'homme moyen*,'⁴⁶ and also names AJ Balfour and Theodore Roosevelt as key architects in the eugenics movement.⁴⁷

The utter, irrevocable failing of this article lies, as evidenced by this citation, in the fact that the sole mention of race comes in Davis' use of the phrase "tribal peoples," a racist and incorrect absurdity in and of itself. Not once in Davis' thinking does the idea that antiBlackness or any process of racialization that occurred in the United States or in the 'global north' more broadly could in any way have influenced the development of the norm surface. For Davis, *a certain kind of society* is not one where race figures in any fashion. In this way, his mentioning of eugenics, AJ Balfour and Theodore Roosevelt (a British architect of Palestinian dispossession and an American president violently opposed to the existence of indigenous peoples, respectively) is rendered particularly and almost absurdly whitewashed. My issue with this framing is not that it lacks racial *inclusivity* per se, but that it lacks a racial analysis that renders anything he has to say about disability off-kilter and incomplete. By not addressing race at all, Davis' commentary on a certain kind of society, on normality and eugenics and '*l'homme moyen*' is rendered inchoate to the point that it is not saying much of anything about disability. However through these citations he does reveal something incredibly telling about the ultranormative orientation of disability studies more broadly.

When race is mentioned in ultranormative disability scholarship, it occurs thusly: "In recent decades, historians and other scholars in the humanities have studied intensely and often

⁴⁶ Davis, "Disability, Normality, and Power," 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid 7.

challenged the ostensibly rational reasons for inequalities based on identity—in particular gender, race, and ethnicity. Disability, however, one of the most prevalent justifications for inequality, has rarely been the subject of historical inquiry,”⁴⁸ or, “only disability might lower a white person in the scale of life to the level of being a marked race.”⁴⁹ Both citations are from Douglas Baynton’s “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” also in the *Disability Studies Reader 5th edition*. From the above, and from our reading of Davis’ work, the ultranormative orientation that is revealed is a white one, one that renders race completely distinct and as having no bearing on disability—historically, epistemologically, ontologically or otherwise. An ultranormative strain of disability studies reads race as a phenomenon parallel to disability in the sense that they both entail an experience of social exclusion or discrimination—evidenced by Baynton’s language of “inequalities based on identity”— and ignoring the structures of oppression and the politics of being that undergird both. Put differently, Baynton’s operative assumption is that ‘inequality’ is caused by a negative stereotype or perception of certain identities (the word ‘minority’ is absent from the citation but certainly implied), rather than by structural, ontological or epistemological forces that operationalize disability.

Furthermore, Baynton’s idea that disability could ‘lower’ a white person’s status to that of ‘a marked race’ reveals an ultranormatively white supremacist orientation by which the presence of disability would render white people (otherwise unmarked, normal, neutral, universal) somehow racialized or subaltern. By extension, we could say that under this logic the social rehabilitation of the disabled person that an ultranormative disability scholarship calls for

⁴⁸ Douglas Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” (Routledge, 2017) 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 21.

is a social rehabilitation into whiteness, which is to say white supremacy. A shift in what Lennard Davis calls the concept of the norm under this framework becomes a shift towards the incorporation of the (white) disabled subject more fully and completely into the project of whiteness, more fully and completely into the status of the unmarked. We then might also say that under this logic, within the milieu of ultranormative disability studies the white disabled person is considered the subject par excellence, rendering the nonwhite or Black disabled subject unable to be thought.

The overwhelming shortcoming of Davis and Baynton's scholarship is that while the status of (white) disabled people is brought into question, the 'certain kind of society' that created such a status never is. While Davis understands that 'the norm' is something that has been constructed, and therefore could be constructed differently, he never questions *why* the norm exists, or that the norm affects not only disabled people, but all oppressed and marginalized people, though differentially. There is no investigation into the structures of power that create the norm, and the stake those structures have in maintaining it. While Baynton understands that racialized and disabled people are both treated 'unequally,' his racial analysis is completely incorrect and saturated with white supremacist thinking. Moreover, this kind of thinking and language—'racialized people and disabled people'—creates an either/or binary that leaves the nonwhite disabled subject unable to be theorized.

It is my contention that the language of ultranormative disability studies renders study on the level of ontology impossible, and moreover forecloses study of Black disability as a subjectivity that is not reducible conceptually or experientially to white disability. It is my contention that a particular white/western/colonial/european/antiBlack politics of being is implicated in an ontology of disability, that this politics of being is crucial to what makes

disability mean, and the language of an ultranormative disability studies makes it impossible to follow this thread of inquiry. ‘Disabled’ is always already white disabled. I want to pivot now into Jasbir Puar’s language in her seminal text *Right to Maim* of “debilitation” rather than “disability,” shifting registers from the phenomenological to the epistemological and the biopolitical, and posing the question of what does such a move open up for us? How does this shift in language allow us to approach this particular politics of being differently? What is revealed, and what is obscured?

Puar’s text is biopolitically sited in Palestine, and more specifically in the settler state of Israel’s apartheid biopolitical statecraft against the state of Palestine and Palestinian life. She writes that, “alongside the ‘right to kill’ I noted a complementary logic long present in Israeli tactical calculations of settler colonial rule—that of creating injury and maintaining Palestinian populations as perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, in order to control them.”⁵⁰ She continues, “I contend that the term ‘debilitation’ is distinct from the term ‘disablement’ because it foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled.”⁵¹ For Puar, debilitation is not a specific set of bodily compartments or functionalities that deviate from ‘the norm,’ but rather a biopolitical process instigated by the settler state’s right to maim. In this way, we can understand debilitation not as a phenomenon but as a relationship that constellates things such as (but certainly not limited to) citizenship claims, the state, infrastructure, labor, war, colonialism, health policy, climate catastrophe and the bodies upon which all of the above are brought to bear. “Debility is thus a crucial complication of the neoliberal transit of disability rights,” Puar writes. “Debility addresses injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than

⁵⁰ Jasbir Puar, *Right to Maim*, (Duke University Press, 2017) x.

⁵¹ Ibid xiv.

epidemic or exceptional.”⁵² In other words, debility upends Davis’ concept of the norm as something that is exclusive to ‘people with disabilities’ and reframes it in such a way that the question of who counts as ‘normal’ and who does not becomes entirely irrelevant in the face of the endemic disabling of disposable (read: racialized, marginalized, systematically oppressed) populations. Rather than what Puar calls the “neoliberal transit of disability rights,” which focuses on the inclusion of disabled people into society (read: inclusion into the colonial state project), we are asked to examine the state and all of its machinations as an arbiter of debility par excellence.

On this point specifically Puar avers, “In a context whereby four-fifths of the world’s people with disabilities are located in what was once hailed as the ‘global south,’ liberal interventions are invariably infused with certitude that disability should be reclaimed as a valuable difference—the difference of the Other—through rights, visibility, and empowerment discourses—rather than addressing how much debilitation is caused by global injustice and the war machines of colonialism, occupation, and U.S imperialism.”⁵³ Not only this, but the idea of reclamation of disability via visibility and rights discourses paints the state—as the bestower of rights—as a neutral entity to which a marginalized population can safely and successfully appeal, ignoring the reality of how states operate in both an imperial and colonial context. The state to which white disabled people in the ‘global north’ want to appeal is the same state debilitating nonwhite populations internally and post/neo-colonized peoples in the ‘global south.’ Puar’s point here also raises the idea that disability both conceptually and as a lived experience does not track the way it is assumed to by global north scholars outside of the global north context in which they are sited. What does it mean to be ‘disabled’ when military regimes are

⁵² Puar, *Right to Maim*, xvii.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

systematically maiming an entire population—whether it be in Palestine, Syria or any number of the SWANA countries that the United States has ceaselessly bombarded in the ‘war on terror’? To bring back Davis’ language here, what does it mean to be ‘disabled’ when debilitation is the norm?

Returning to our critique of ultranormative disability studies and the political project it engenders, Puar writes that, “How one comes to disability, whether it be through the exceptional accident—the loss of able-bodied whiteness, for example, the single-axis identity formation, the one thing that makes one different—or living racialization, and in fact racism as debilitation, profoundly shapes what disability is and what it can become. In turn these distinctions drive political projects that are often divergent and in contradiction to one another.”⁵⁴ I am particularly interested in Puar’s indexing of the single-axis identity formation and its contribution to divergent and contradicting political projects here. Perhaps we might say, using Puar’s framing, that an ultranormative disability studies inherently revolves around a single-axis identity formation—under an ultranormative framing, disability is the only thing ‘marking’ a body as Other and the social effects of disability are the only thing that must be ameliorated in order for a disabled person to participate as ‘normal.’ The political project that the ultranormative, single-axis then necessitates is one of accommodation, positioning itself at odds with many of the political projects working towards radical and intersectional Black liberation that take as their root the idea that we live in a foundationally anti-Black society built on stolen land.

It is my contention that we must seriously ask ourselves whether the language of ‘disability’ as it has been put forth by disability studies, entrenched in the ultranormative and the single axis, white supremacy and phenomenology as it is, is able to be extricated and used in an ontological inquiry rooted in a theory that takes anti-Blackness as central to the workings of

⁵⁴ Puar, *Right to Maim*, 66.

‘normality’ and ‘power’ in our society. By contrast, the utility and perhaps beauty of Puar’s foregrounding of debilitation rather than disability is that it allows us to constellate multiple positions at once, opens us onto an entire morbid universe of the biopolitical. If, as Puar argues, debility involves the slow wearing down of a population, a biopolitical relationship between the state and a whole network of interlocking systems that uphold the state, and those bodies, “slated for debilitation,”⁵⁵ how might we understand the residents of Flint, Michigan as debilitated? Indigenous peoples consigned to the reservation system? Do Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank really have access to that which might be called ‘able-bodiedness’ when their daily movement is ever more restricted by checkpoints and the utilities needed to survive are routinely withheld by the occupier? Can the necropolitical machinations of the settler United States against Black folks as cohered in the system of policing, and in the known and unknown deaths of Black folks by the state be understood as debility in the sense that it is an attempted slow wearing down of a population?

When we loosen our grip on the language of ‘disabled’ and let our thinking about bodies be worked over and through by Puar’s language of debility, we can find and follow the thread that links bodies and the state, the ways in which bodies–bodily capacities, bodily functioning, and bodily integrity–are targets of the workings of state, crucially along lines of race, class and gender. However, while this epistemological and biopolitical reframing of disability as debility is critical for understanding bodily difference on the valence of population and society, it does not touch upon the ways in which these biopolitical systems come to bear on the visceral, on the meaning of debilitated bodies, and on the multiplicitous interactions between the body as viscera, the state in its many iterative forms, the state’s messaging about such debilitated bodies, and the

⁵⁵ Puar, *Right to Maim*, x.

environment—very often in a state of debilitation itself—in which debilitated and bodies are supposed to exist.

My intention in raising this last point is not to name a shortcoming or lacuna in Puar’s work, but rather to gesture to my own scholarly approach that is patchwork and piecemeal. This term “debility” moves us somewhere important, asks us to dislocate ourselves from ultranormative disability in unruly and generative ways, but the framework of debilitation is not the answer to a question, the solution to a problem. The goal of naming language and frameworks that operate in specious and problematic ways is not then to find the “correct” language, the next, better, more progressive wording or phrasing, but rather to simply pick up a thread and be committed to following it, to open something knowing that once opened it can never again be closed. The goal is to be committed to opening, tinkering, loosening, lysing—as a process whose purpose is not completion, cell death of a particular phraseology, but rather continuing, doing, letting that doing and continuing move us somewhere unforeseeable.

To close this section on language, I wish to turn to the work of disability justice organizer and writer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and organizer Patty Berne, in order to explore the differences between the ways in which “disability” circulates within an academic milieu versus how radical intersectional organizers are engaging, tinkering, and working with this white language on their own queer woman of color terms. Piepzna-Samarasinha’s and Berne’s work also further elaborates my patchwork approach in the sense that understanding that this particular language is fundamentally limiting in one particular location does not mean that it is not workable in another, that it must be thrown out wholesale and “better” language be found. It is also to highlight the ways in which this thinking and this struggle with naming is not new—I in my scholarly endeavors have not “discovered” a heretofore unexamined problem, but rather that

I am joining a lineage of radical thinkers and organizers, picking up and continuing work on this particular thread in a way that I hope is helpful in some way.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes in her text *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* that, “To me, disability justice means a political movement and many interlocking communities where disability is not defined in white terms, or male terms, or straight terms,”⁵⁶ and that, “when we do disability justice work, it becomes impossible to look at disability and not examine how colonialism created it.”⁵⁷ Disability justice, according to Piepzna-Samarasinha is a departure from the 1990s formulation of “disability rights,” a political movement to which ultranormative disability studies is indebted for its creation, and instead foregrounds the idea that, “our focus is less on civil rights legislation as the only solution to ableism and more on a vision of liberation that understands that the state was built on racist, colonialist ableism and will not save us, because it was created to kill us.”⁵⁸ Taking these citations together, it is clear that Piepzna-Samarasinha, as just one of a multitude of disability justice organizers and thinkers, views an intersectional praxis as central to disability liberation, rather than as an add-on or side issue. Here, by centering the state and “racist, colonialist, ableism,” disability justice is envisioned as a radical movement towards total liberation, not as a single-issue movement to incorporate disabled people—using the flawed and partial discourse of ‘civil rights’—into an already extant unjust civil society. Rather than viewing the problem, as Lennard Davis does, as a lack of inclusion, disability justice forces us to ask the question: to what are we trying to be included? And how does the system from which we seek acceptance actually harm oppressed peoples?

⁵⁶ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018) 22.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid 23.

Similarly, Patty Berne, the author of a seminal disability justice manifesto, writes that one of the core tenants of disability justice is “leadership of the most impacted,” which, “reflects our understanding of ableism in the context of other historical systemic oppressions, thus we are led by those who most know these systems.”⁵⁹ Berne also states that, “Disability Justice shares two additional principles with other justice-based movements—an Anti-Capitalist Politic and a Commitment to Cross Movement Organizing. We are anti-capitalist as the very nature of our mind/bodies resists conforming to a capitalist ‘normative’ productive standard...Necessarily cross movement, Disability Justice shifts how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, lending itself toward a united front politic.”⁶⁰ Here again, we see that the ways in which disability justice is committed to naming systems of harm—such as capitalism—is central to understanding *oppression* (rather than social or physical barriers to inclusion). Crucially, the forms of injustice that are being named do not affect disabled people exclusively, but come to bear on variously positioned marginalized people, shifting the framework from the single-issue to one which disability is part of a wider network of oppression. It is also worth noting that Berne mentions the idea of the ‘norm’ or the ‘normative,’ but explicitly links it to capitalism, rather than Davis’ nebulous and disconnected concept of the norm.

Ultimately, disability justice is about dreaming and working towards the birth of a new society in which disabled people are valued—not because of what we could contribute to capitalism if given the right ‘reasonable accommodations,’ not because we can be rehabilitated into proper citizens and state subjects—but simply because we are, because we exist as always already inherently valuable beings. According to Berne and Piepzna-Samarasinha, such a radically altered society would necessarily also have to be a society in which capitalism is

⁵⁹ Patty Berne, “Disability Justice—A Working Draft,” (Sins Invalid, 2015).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

abolished, in which antiBlackness is truly dismantled, in which the ‘post’ in postcolonial actually means something. Put differently, disabled people cannot be held as valuable under systems of capitalism, antiBlackness, and colonialism. For disability justice thinkers and organizers, intersectional liberation does not denote the concept of multiple groups of marginalized people liberating themselves at the same time separately, but rather more like the Combahee River Collective’s intonation that no one is free until everyone is free, that the freedom of the most marginalized among us will lead to freedom for all, including disabled people.

While for Jasbir Puar the frameshift away from the ultranormative was an epistemological one—moving from a phenomenon of exceptional disablement to a biopolitical framework of debilitation—for Berne and Piepzna-Samarasinha the turn away from the ultranormative was in the movement from the narrow single-issue formulation of the ‘disability rights’ movement, to the radically intersectional disability justice. These organizers subverted the ‘baggage’ around the language of ‘disability’ circulated by the academy and instead engaged with it on their own radical, unruly, and undisciplined terms. In this section I have outlined what I have called ‘ultranormative disability studies’ in order to understand exactly what is happening, and not happening in the scholarship that could be said to be archetypal of disability studies scholarship, even as that scholarship is constantly morphing and shifting in more generative directions. In gesturing towards this ultranormative archetype, I wish to contend that the language of disability, specifically as it circulates within the academic milieu, is coated in the sticky residue of capitalist and white supremacist normativity, making it exceedingly difficult to engage with it on other terms. Put differently, it is exceedingly difficult to make a generative inquiry into the politics of being at stake in disability—a politics of being molded by what Sylvia Wynter calls the overdetermination of Man—using language that has been entrenched in a form of

inquiry so deeply lacking a structural analysis, that is invested in maintaining that overdetermination. I then turned to the work of Jasbir Puar, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Patty Berne in order to offer a patchwork constellation of the ways this language has been subverted—either by radically recycling it towards different ends, or refusing it altogether in favor of other language and therefore other vantage points.

Aime Cesaire, in a speech delivered called, “Poetry and Knowledge” cautions that, “the word increasingly risks appearing as an algebraic notation that makes the world intelligible.”⁶¹ I leave you with this rather opaque declaration in order to assert that my discussion of language is not in the service of finding the right language, the best language, the most incrementally better language than the language we had before. I am not attempting to solve some sort of mathematical equation that would render the problem and/or its solution more intelligible. A lack of intelligibility is not part of the problem and the creation of intelligibility through language is not part of the solution. In fact the exact inverse might be closer to the truth: the creation of intelligibility, of legibility, of an ability to tell someone about what you are and what you are up to is always already ripe for co-optation by the state, by the non profit industrial complex, by some academic sniffing around for tenure. “The hospital talks to the prison which talks to the university which talks to the NGO which talks to the corporation through governance,” Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write. “Everybody knows everything about our biopolitics.”⁶² The language of disability is fraught at best and rife with all kinds of problematic entanglements that must be externalized and from which we must dislocate ourselves. However, the conversation about language is not a vehicle to a solution, the conversation about language is the solution, if we take the language of the ‘solution’ to be generative in the first place. The conversation opens

⁶¹ Aime Cesaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” (Verso, 1996) 140.

⁶² Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 57.

something up for us, creates for us a space of questioning that is, I contend, most generative and creative when we untether it from the imperative to answer a question.

On the University.

“In the clear, critical light of day, illusory administrators whisper of our need for institutions, and all institutions are political, and all politics are correctional,” Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write in *The Undercommons*. “So it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us. But we won’t stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are there is nothing wrong with us. We don’t want to be correct and we won’t be corrected.”⁶³ In this section I will be weaving our thread about language with our introductory thread about telling and sharing, about telling all of you but not anyone else, and set our sights on the university. It is my contention that the western university is a site from which a particular politics of being emanates and in which a politics of being is consolidated. It is my contention that a scholarly imperative to tell—that is, the production of academic knowledge about a population that a scholar has decided is studiable based on the criteria that either there is something wrong with them that must be quantified in order to save said population, or that there is nothing wrong with them, and therefore study must be done in order to prove definitively their naturalness, their normativity—relies upon what Sylvia Wynter calls the overdetermination of Man. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write in their article, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” “Settler colonial ideology, constituted by its conscription of the other, holds the wounded body as more engrossing than the body that is not wounded (through the person with a wounded body does not politically or materially benefit for being more engrossing).”⁶⁴

⁶³ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 20.

⁶⁴ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” (2014) 227.

The scholarly imperative to produce and recirculate particular types of knowledges about, on the backs of, and around, certain kinds of populations (the marginalized ones, the ones who have been measured against the yardstick of the human and always come up a few inches too short, the ones that, as Moten and Harney write, “are all out of compass however precisely they are located”⁶⁵), is bound up in particular genres of humanness. The creation of scholarship is a humanizing business, which is to say a correctional business, a business in which humanization and pathologization are two sides of the same coin. No matter the standpoint or the politics of the scholar, rendering peoples into populations, deeming certain peoples as available or worthy of performing study on can only ever create deviance and victimization. Within this schematic, giving language to, on, and about these populations is then understood to be an ameliorating act: making the studiable population visible through telling is thought to be the first step to humanizing this population—either by revealing some secret pain that can be cured by policy, allowing ‘them’ into the fold of the more fully human, or by revealing that ‘they’ are just like ‘you’ and ‘I,’ and therefore have been properly human all along. ‘We’ were just not able to construe them as such without this particular scholarly intervention. ‘We’ just needed ‘their’ existence translated into something that ‘we’ could more easily understand.

In this section, I will be examining the work of Charisse Burden-Stelly, Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, Saidiya Hartman, and Karida Brown and John Itzigsohn to attempt to elaborate what I mean here: to understand the stakes of the western university’s machinations towards a particular politics of being, and how humanness becomes the thing that is worked on, over, and through in a western academic milieu. Moreover, I wish to contend, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney do, that “it’s evil and uncool to have a place in the sun in the dirty thinness of this

⁶⁵ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 52.

atmosphere.”⁶⁶ And what I mean by that is, the impurity of this place, its motives, its biopolitics, and the insidious ways in which it creeps through us and possesses us, should make us pause before the idea that its subversion is possible, that its subversion will not somehow become laundered towards the university’s (un)stated aims. I do not wish to suggest that it is impossible to subvert the university’s correctional politics, or take the nihilist view that it does not matter how we do scholarship because the western university will co-opt it anyway, but I do wish to offer the idea that perhaps the legibilization of scholarship as subversive or radical means that the university already owns it. The question then becomes how do we not stand corrected? How do we refuse a place in the sun in the dirty thinness of this atmosphere, knowing that the atmosphere will likely still be dirty and thin anywhere we go? How do we remain incorrectly illegible while still sharing ourselves with others who desire towards the same unfinishable project?

In their article, “A Manifesto for a Contemporary Du Boisian Sociology” authors Karida Brown and Jose Itzigsohn imagine a new and improved version of sociological study based on W.E.B Du Bois’ methodologies and principles. They argue that examining Du Bois’ work offers us a way to refashion a problematic sociological practice along more humanitarian and social justice lines. The repeated emphasis is on crafting a sociological method based on the legacy of W.E.B DuBois that rights the historical wrongs of sociology as a discipline. They write that they want to, “address our fellow mainstream sociologists and talk with them about how the practice of sociology must change in order to be more inclusive,”⁶⁷ and that, “We believe that taking seriously the full scope of Du Bois’s sociology will create the space to take inventory of ‘who we are’ as a discipline, re-evaluate our ideals of who we strive to be, and help us build a critical and

⁶⁶ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 18.

⁶⁷ Karida Brown and John Itzigsohn, “A Manifesto for a Contemporary DuBoisian Sociology,” (NYU Press, 2020) 186.

inclusive sociology.”⁶⁸ In both citations the word ‘inclusive’ should be flagged: for Brown and Itzigsohn the problem with sociology as a field is that it is simply not *inclusive* enough, with their logic being that if only marginalized scholars were able to take the helm of sociological study, the field could be moved in a more progressive direction. For them, the problem is that given the racist history of sociology, its contemporary ideals simply do not align with those of racial justice and equity, and what is needed is a re-evaluation and subsequent frameshift, a reckoning with a dark past in order to not repeat its mistakes and craft a brighter future for sociological study.

I wish to dwell on Brown and Itzigsohn’s logic, if only for a moment, not to dismiss their argumentation wholesale but to examine what is continued to be taken for granted in their formulation of the problem and subsequent solution. The logic underlying their article, quite loud and yet simultaneously nearly undetectable, is that sociological study is a necessary undertaking, and though their reasons for its necessity are not clearly outlined in the article, we might guess that they believe that it is a needed intervention for a perceived problem—that understanding a community’s material conditions, attitudes, and beliefs is a crucial first step in improving the quality of ‘their’ lives lived under systematic racial oppression, patriarchy, ableism, etc. What is clear, however, is that they believe that those best equipped to do this kind of work are those who are also most impacted by these interconnected systems of domination and oppression, a contention that few with a certain orientation to social justice would refute. The question at stake here then, is whether or not we believe that sociology is needed, and whether the intervention that Brown and Itzigsohn propose will really achieve what they intend. Does inclusion and a re-evaluation of ideals fundamentally reroute the imperative to tell that we have already

⁶⁸ Brown and Itzigsohn, “A Manifesto for a Contemporary DuBoisian Sociology,” 186.

established is at best a problem and at worst a violence? Or does it simply become laundered and reiterated without our knowledge, to say nothing of our consent?

By sharp contrast, Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang argue in their article, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” that, “Academic knowledge is particular and privileged, yet disguises itself as universal and common; it is settler colonial; it already refuses desire; it sets limits to potentially dangerous Other knowledges; it does so through erasure, but importantly, also through *inclusion* and its own imperceptibility.”⁶⁹ Here we can see the ways in which Tuck and Yang execute a particular type of frameshift away from normative scholarship, one that further dislocates us from business as usual and confronts us with epistemological questions about the nature of academic knowledge as a way of knowing. Crucially, and almost as if to rebut Brown and Itzigsohn’s argumentation directly, Tuck and Yang assert that the particular, privileged, and settler colonial nature of academic knowledge is not only to exclude marginalized voices, but to recruit them into this system; that inclusion commits violence just as exclusion does. They coin the term “damage-centered research” and describe that, “damage-centered researchers may operate, even benevolently, within a theory of change in which harm must be recorded or proven in order to convince an outside adjudicator that reparations are deserved.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, they assert that, “We are writing about a particular form of loquaciousness of the academy, one that thrives on specific representations of power and oppression, and rarefied portrayals of dysfunction and pain.”⁷¹

There are a few things I wish to flag here in the above citations that I think bear further discussion, particularly in light of our reading of Brown and Itzigsohn. The first is the idea that

⁶⁹ Tuck and Yang, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” 235, emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ *Ibid* 227.

⁷¹ *Ibid* 232.

academic knowledge, “disguises itself as universal and common,”⁷² and that its imperceptible particularity forecloses what Tuck and Yang called, “dangerous Other knowledges.”⁷³ Academic knowledge production positions itself as de facto, as a standard of knowing against which all other forms of knowing are measured—and this de facto status is laundered, diffused, and otherwise buried so deep into the foundations, becomes so normalized that it is, as Tuck and Yang tell us, nearly imperceptible. This imperceptibility, this covertly circulated and (en)forced commonness, is what structures Brown and Itzigsohn’s call for a Duboisian sociology, by design without their knowledge. The call for a Duboisian sociology continues to center the prestige and authority of western academic ways of knowing over and above the authority of the marginalized communities that would be studied under this sociological knowing, even as a Duboisian sociology claims, genuinely I believe, to value marginalized voices. Crucially, this imperceptibility, this (en)forced commonness, means that the genuinely held beliefs of those doing scholarly work, their orientation to justice or a liberatory politics does not matter. They are recruited into this western, which is to say colonial academic project that holds certain forms of knowledge production as the standard at the expense and in service of the violence against the dispossessed communities that scholarly agents may genuinely care about and with whom they are in solidarity—whether as insiders to those communities or as politically aligned outsiders.

Additionally, I wish to draw us to Tuck and Yang’s indexing of “dangerous Other knowledges,” particularly to the qualifier ‘dangerous’—because it is not that the western university has categorically barred Other knowledges from circulating, but that these Other knowledges more often than not must necessarily be defanged in some way as a condition for entry. Then what would a dangerous Other knowledge be? Would it be one that said, on our own

⁷² Tuck and Yang, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” 235.

⁷³ Ibid.

terms, in our own language, that there is nothing wrong with us? Would it be one that refused wholesale the trap of pathologization/humanization, in which pathology must be proved in order for humanness to be offered, which is to say imposed? Would it be the knowledge that we can never and will never know about, simply because it is useless, which is to say the university has no use for it? Is it the knowledge that says, ‘okay fine, we’re not human but some other thing that only we know about or understand, that is totally and completely illegible and untranslatable’?

Finally, I wish to discuss what Tuck and Yang describe as the loquaciousness of the academy as it intersects with Moten and Harney’s intonation *we’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anybody else*, and what Tuck and Yang describe as, “rarefied portrayals of dysfunction and pain.”⁷⁴ Here again, we run into this idea that scholarly agents are induced to tell, that there is an imperative towards uncovering some secret about a group of people labeled as a population and then making this secret do labor. Put differently, this secret must be made to be revealed over and over again in a fashion that might be described as an ‘industrial complex,’ recirculated and shuttled to and through various institutional actors in a way that we are told is the key to addressing the problem. And this secret is the rarefied pain and so-called dysfunction of the people we have corralled into a population—it is the pathology, revealed and translated, that then makes these populations available for humanization. In other words, your/our/their secret pain must be exposed so that they/we/you can solve it, and by solving it grant you/us/them the humanness that we are supposed to want. Except what if this bargain is a trap? What if this recirculation of the revealed secret of dysfunctional pain is actually a road to nowhere, or a road to the implementation of some specious policy that only routes us in circles?

As the title of their article, “R-Words: Refusing Research” suggests, Tuck and Yang present the idea of refusal and of refusing research as a way out of this trap. They write,

⁷⁴ Tuck and Yang, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” 232.

“Refusal, and stances of refusal in research, are attempts to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known.”⁷⁵ Rather than calling for a reformulation or rearrangement of research such as, we might argue, a Duboisian sociology does, Tuck and Yang contend here that there are some things that we cannot and must not research, that not all knowledges and ways of knowing are up for grabs. Put differently, the only way to avoid subjecting oppressed and dispossessed communities to the damage of the western university is to not involve the western university. I am interested here in the way that Tuck and Yang’s formulation of refusal acts as a pause, a speed bump in our thinking that communities-as-populations need help—and need help specifically from scholarly agents; that somehow scholarly agents are uniquely poised to help (to save, to reveal, to humanize); that the intervention of scholarly agent, and by extension the intervention of the western university is the help that is needed or wanted.

Rather than framing refusal as a foreclosure, I am interested in which we might understand refusal as an opening. I am interested in posing the question, what kinds of possibility does this refusal—this pause that asks us, perhaps forcefully, to externalize the imperceptible and imperceptibly (en)forced universality of the western university—open up for us? In the sense that this refusal of the norm and the pause it instantiates allows us to reorient ourselves to each other and the world and the task at hand—a task that may not be the university’s task. In the sense that the refusal of this reality, of this truth, allows us to imagine what another reality, another truth, might be. In other words, in what ways does the western university constitute a morbid universe and how can refusal become a mode of lysis?

⁷⁵ Tuck and Yang, “R-Words: Refusing Research,” 225.

While Tuck and Yang's scholarship focuses on the activity of scholarly agents, Charisse Burden-Stelly's article, "Black Studies in the Westernized University: The Interdisciplines and the Elision of Political Economy," turns its attention towards the institution within which these scholarly agents must operate. Quite plainly and quite boldly, Burden-Stelly writes, "the westernized university plays a fundamental role in the maintenance of the state as an institution by which national values are cultivated, stored, and reproduced,"⁷⁶ and also argues that, "by the late 1960s the westernized university had become the 'training ground' for how the US state and capital ought to contend with meaning, representation, and accommodation of minority difference."⁷⁷ I briefly turn to Burden-Stelly's work in order to deepen our understanding of the ways in which the western, or as Burden-Stelly refers to it, the westernized university functions as a critical node in a network that includes capital and the state; that includes capital and the state as fundamental arbiters and perpetrators of an antiBlack politics of being. As Burden-Stelly argues, the westernized university is tasked with the maintenance of antiBlackness and by extension, a metalogic of ableism as a national value.

In this way, we can see that the bounding of people into populations, the revelation of pathology, and the imposition of the human that we just discussed as intrinsic to academic research labor is part and parcel of a much broader biopolitical strategy. As Moten and Harney tell us, and as I have cited twice already in this thesis, "Everybody knows everything about our biopolitics."⁷⁸ To weave in a thread from even earlier in this thesis, Jasbir Puar's *Right to Maim*, we might understand this process of knowledge extraction, (re)production, and circulation through these various nodal institutions as a form of maiming in itself, a form of slow

⁷⁶ Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Black Studies in the Westernized University: The Interdisciplines and the Elision of Political Economy," (Routledge, 2019) 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid 75.

⁷⁸ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 57.

biopolitical wearing down of a population whose purpose is to keep said population alive, but suspended in a debilitated and debilitating dispossession that will never be ameliorated by the intervention of research, research that in fact does immense harm. In this way, we can see that the inducement to tell that scholarship entails, is the inducement of the western university to know the “Other,” to do work on the Other in the service of antiBlack and colonial capital and state machinations, to consolidate, uphold and recirculate a particular politics of being rooted in the dead-end circular logic of pathologization/humanization. In this way, we can see that to tell is to tattle on, to fulfill our role as scholarly agents is to be a snitch.

The question underlying this section of the thesis is perhaps best posed by Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts,” that is, “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?”⁷⁹ How can we refuse the western university’s grammar? Which is to say, how do we bear witness to both the suffering and the creative survival of that suffering that is all around us all the time, in greater and greater degrees of intensity as the apocalypse makes landfall again and again, and evade the impetus to regurgitate it to the institution? How do we orient ourselves towards, what Saidiya Hartman calls, “narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in gaps and provide closure...the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man”⁸⁰

As stated in the previous section, I do not believe that finding tangible or actionable answers to these questions is a generative use of our time, as the articulation of an answer to the question, how do we subvert the western university, is already the first step to the co-optation

⁷⁹ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 4.

⁸⁰ Ibid 12.

and absorption of that answer into the western university itself. However we articulate to each other what it is that we propose to do, it must be derelict to capital and antithetical to the discourse of Man. It must refuse the pathologization/humanization paradigm by proclaiming with an unbridled intensity that the human is not what we aspire to. We will not jump through your hoops to what you call salvation and we call a trapdoor. As incorrect as we are, there is nothing wrong with us. The purpose of this section has been to elaborate the ways in which what Sylvia Wynter calls the overdetermination of Man—the privileging of the human, a concept delineated by anti-Blackness, colonialism, and ableism, as the yardstick to which to those Others must always be measured against and crucially always found to be lacking (for if they are not found to be lacking, if they are not unhuman or pathologically human, than what need is there to study them?)—is consolidated, recirculated, and enforced by and within the westernized university.

This process occurs with or without the consent of the scholarly agents at work within the university; we are recruited whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. Thus, while the language of refusal feels crucial in reorienting ourselves around a different kind of project within the western university that might be called subversive, unruly, or undisciplined, the practice—or even the prospect of having such a practice—feels slippery, fraught, or even futile. My intention in this section was to understand and by understanding begin to unmoor us from, the imperative towards the human, which also necessarily entails an imperative towards pathologization, the herding of people into populations, and the telling on and about these populations' pathology so that humanness can be bestowed (imposed, enforced). What would it mean to know, to understand, to share, in the absence of the human? Against the human? Furthermore, what would it mean to refuse to reinvent the human as something more equitable or inclusive, and rather dislocate ourselves from that concept to such a degree that there was no longer any correlation

between signifier and signified? What if we whispered around a campfire rather than going to a conference? What if we said no to all of this, if for the only reason that the weight of humanness is unbearable, a burden we refuse to be forced to bear any longer?

Conclusion: Towards Medical Abolition.

In “Unsettling the Coloniality,” Sylvia Wynter argues that all peoples have mapped their descriptive statements of the human onto the cosmos. In other words, the world ordering schema of all peoples throughout time, as cohered in a descriptive statement of the human, has been externalized—not only does a world ordering schema come to bear on what it means to be properly human, but also how one interprets the world around them. On this Wynter writes that, “in doing so, they had thereby mapped their specific criterion of being human...onto the physical cosmos, thereby absolutizing each such criterion; and with this enabling them to be experienced by each order’s subjects as if they had been supernaturally (and, as such, extrahumanly) determined criteria.”⁸¹ In other words, by externalizing a peoples’ descriptive statement of the human onto the world around them, that descriptive statement of the human could be experienced by that people as if it were supernaturally or extrahumanly ordained—as if this people in question had not brought this descriptive statement into being themselves, as if this descriptive statement was some kind of universal truth completely outside of the control of this people in question, as if this people in question had no agency in the determination of their descriptive statement of the human.

Crucially, and by crucially I mean we should receive this next citation with a sense of gravity and deep implication, Wynter writes that, “This, therefore, meant that all such knowledges of the physical cosmos, all such astronomies, all such geographies, whatever the vast

⁸¹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 271.

range of human needs they had successfully met...had still remained adaptive truths-for and, as such, ethno-astronomies, ethno-geographies.”⁸² To conclude this thesis I will put out a call for medical abolition on the basis that medicine is not some kind of universal truth, not some kind of extrahumanly ordained system of knowledge that humans merely had to uncover progressively over time. Medicine is, in fact, an ethnomedicine—a system of knowledge that, like all other systems of knowledge, is always already culturally specific, occurring within and springing forth from a specific cultural, spatial, and temporal moment, a specific adaptive truth-for, a specific descriptive statement of the human. The particular ethnomedicine I will be referring to in this section is a western european-north american ethnomedicine, commonly referred to today as ‘western medicine,’ ‘biomedicine,’ ‘modern medicine,’ or simply, ‘medicine.’

As a point of clarification, by putting out a call for medical abolition I am not making an argument about the utility of western ethnomedicine, I am not arguing that ethnomedicine has not met a vast range of human needs, as Wynter puts it. Rather, I seek to put out a call for medical abolition as a way to ask questions that the language of reform does not allow for—about the particular cultural, spatial, and temporal moment from which western ethnomedicine sprung and the ways in which that particular moment continues to reverberate and recirculate from and within this particular institution, about the ways in which a performance of medicine is inextricably bound to a performance of Man, of humanness and the human’s Other, a performance of the enforcement of humanness and the maintenance of the line between human and un/in/nonhuman. The language of reform, to use ethnomedicine’s own parlance, only allows us to see the symptoms of this politics of being, its granular manifestations that might be said, to continue the metaphor, to be diseased. It does not allow us to dig deep into an ontology of western ethnomedicine—what ethnomedicine has come to mean and how that contemporary

⁸² Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 271.

meaning is inextricable from its origins. It is my contention that the language of abolition does something specific, allows us to think about ourselves, the world, and the possibilities therein in a particular and generative way. In other words, even if you read this section and come to your own conclusions that medical abolition is not what is needed, if you read this and think that the concept is an absurd, utopian, sisyphian task, it is my contention that the conversation will have been generative anyways, that the framework of abolition helps us do the work of dislocating ourselves from a deeply entrenched—almost to the point of being hermetically sealed—logic that ethnomedicine is *the* ultimate good, a logic within which questioning why ethnomedicine exists in the first place is unthinkable.

In this section we could talk about Anarcha and Betsey and Lucy, how his experimentation on them became the foundation of modern ethnogynecology. We could talk about how the bodies of enslaved individuals, and then free Black individuals, were used as the source material for many if not most of American ethnomedical breakthroughs, the ways in which Black bodies were seen to be somehow biologically different from white bodies and yet the results that this ethnomedical experimentation yielded translated into ethnomedical interventions that benefited white bodies only. If you need to see ‘proof’ of this I will provide sources in the footnotes. About Tuskegee or Henrietta Lacks.⁸³ It is my contention that this history of ethnomedicine is not some kind of aberration of western ethnomedicine, but constitutes the truth of what western ethnomedicine is, that antiBlackness and beliefs about Blackness as it pertained to physiology and biology is the adaptive truth—for out of which western ethnomedicine sprung, is the descriptive statement of the human that was mapped onto the cosmos of ‘healing.’ It is my contention that these stories were not a stain on the history of

⁸³ For more on this see: *Killing the Black Body* by Dorothy Roberts; *Medicalizing Blackness* by Rana Hogarth; *Medical Apartheid* by Harriet Washington; *Medical Bondage* by Dierdre Cooper Owens; *Black on Both Sides* by C. Riley Snorton; *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot.

ethnomedicine, not a wrong turn in the march of progress to be course corrected, but the framework through which we must view modern ethnomedicine in order to make sense of it. However, I will not be reproducing these stories in the body of this thesis. I will not be replicating a grammar of violence in order to convince you that there is a scene of subjection. I will not prove a thesis of medical abolition by telling on, and by telling on continuing to extract from, perform labor upon, do work to, pathologize the innumerable victims of western ethnomedicine. I will not prove a thesis of medical abolition by doing the thing that I am calling for to be abolished.

Instead, I wish to turn our attention to a riot. A riot as a rupture of the unquestionable progress of western ethnomedicine. A riot as a way to make thinkable the questioning of modern ethnomedicine. A riot as a way to hear and pick up and circulate a call that has already been made by others, to tune into a frequency rather than adhering to the western university's fetishization with inventing something new to say. A riot as a way to join a happening. In her text *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Ariella Aisha Azoulay writes that, "Potential history originates from a refusal to accept the outcome of violence as *fait accompli* and the insistence that there is always something to be done because nothing is over."⁸⁴ She also writes that, "history as an imperial discipline tells plausible stories, without questioning the violence that provides its practitioners with the building blocks that render the stories plausible—worlds shredded violently into legible pieces to compose historical narratives...Potential history refuses to inhabit the position of the historian who arrives after the events are over."⁸⁵ It is this analytic—that of Ariella Aisha Azoulay's potential history—that I wish to use in understanding this particular riot as a moment of medical abolition.

⁸⁴ Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019) 291.

⁸⁵ Ibid 286.

Following Azoulay, I desire to use the Medical Riots of 1788 as a way to refuse the (unable-to-be-thought) violence inhered in the founding of modern ethnomedicine—a violence that operated according to an antiBlack politics of being and literally operated on enslaved Black individuals who were seen only as flesh upon which to be experimented—as *fait accompli*. In relaying to you this story I endeavor to find a way to refuse to be a historian in the sense that I refuse to arrive after the events are over. I refuse to see these events as over. I demand that we investigate the Medical Riots of 1788 as if we are still inside that circle—not placing ourselves in their position or imbuing the rioters retrospectively with a grand purpose that they did not have, but placing ourselves inside a circle in such a way so as to allow time to lyse, and in allowing time to lyse allowing medical abolition to be thought. Because if the Medical Riots of 1788 are not over, if we allow the Medical Riots of 1788 to be interior to us, then they still have a bearing on our present. By refusing the logic of the insular event, the dot on the timeline, the steam engine of progressive history, we open ourselves up to the possibility that there might have been people refusing ethnomedicine this whole time, and we have only to join them. It does not matter whether or not the Medical Riots of 1788 ‘accomplished’ something according to a capitalist/ableist schema of accomplishment. The fact that someone, somewhere, at some time said no to the violent progress of western ethnomedicine means that this western ethnomedicine is not as universal or extrahuman as it is contended to be. It means that the violence of western ethnomedicine is not *fait accompli*.

The first time I came across the Medical Riots of 1788 was in Harriet Washington’s *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. Her chapter, “The Restless Dead” meticulously documents the shifts in medical education that suddenly required a seemingly endless supply of cadavers for

dissection, and the way that the cadavers of Black Americans were viewed by the ethnomedical establishment as both ontologically available for use and also disposable. Washington writes, “For blacks, anatomical dissection meant even more: It was an extension of slavery into eternity, because it represented a profound level of control over their bodies, illustrating that they were not free even in death.”⁸⁶ This citation indexes the way in which this practice both practically and ontologically represented not some kind of unusual cruelty out of the bounds of ‘regular’ enslavement, but that ethnomedical experimentation (in this case in the form of postmortem dissection), was wholly within its purview—a logical extension in the eyes of ethnomedicine rather than a cruel transgression.

Additionally crucial to contextualizing the Medical Riots of 1788 is the way that ethnomedicine forced a shift in the ontology and epistemology of non-living bodies more generally, tellingly described by Washington in terms akin to that of the living enslaved. While previously, non-living bodies were tended to by family and community, and deeply central to death-related rituals, “Dissection, however, gave the corpse a very different meaning, limiting [them] to a bit of useful flesh, an *object* to be surgically severed from his community, treated with disdain, then discarded like trash.”⁸⁷ With this, we might understand the ethnomedical turn towards non-living bodies as the raw material for ‘learning’ and ‘discovery’ as being deeply entrenched with and enabled by chattel slavery, and in fact perhaps dependent on enslavement—both as a practical reality and as a descriptive statement of the human. To loop back around to my first section on Sylvia Wynter and the enfleshment of the human, in this practice of dissection there begins to emerge a coherence of humanness, flesh, body, objecthood, Blackness,

⁸⁶ Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, (Doubleday, 2006) 125.

⁸⁷ *Ibid* 125, emphasis in original.

and a logic of chattel slavery through and within the milieu of ethnomedicine. In other words, ethnomedicine is a crucial site where these linkages, as a particular adaptive truth-for and politics of being, are consolidated and circulated.

The riot in question was only mentioned in passing in *Medical Apartheid*, almost not meant to be dwelled on. Of it, Washington writes, “Blacks were among the five thousand rioters who stormed New York Hospital in the two-day Doctors’ Riot of 1788, pillaging Columbia Medical School and assaulting physicians in retaliation for disturbing the eternal rest of New Yorkers.”⁸⁸ This riot, in some sources called the Medical Riots of 1788 and in some sources called the Doctors’ Riot of 1788, centered around violent resistance to this practice of ethnomedical dissection, and in particular the theft of bodies from local graveyards, which in New York had reached a height of absurdity. The riot began in April, and in the months preceding debates on the morality of this practice raged. In February of 1788 a petition was lodged to the Common Council of New York by a number of Black Freedmen demanding an end, or at least a regulating of the practice of graverobbing in the service of ethnomedical dissection, as Black bodies were, unsurprisingly, disinterred at a far higher rate than white bodies. Their petition was not only denied but went wholly unanswered.⁸⁹

In an editorial in a contemporaneous newspaper, an anonymous source wrote—specifically commenting on the practice of the theft of Black bodies—“this horrid practice is pursued to make merchandise of human bones, more than for the purpose of improvement of anatomy.”⁹⁰ At the risk of overreading, I want to entertain the possibility here that the author of this editorial is not referring to the literal sale of bones (although such a thing would be almost

⁸⁸ Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 126.

⁸⁹ Jules Calvin Ladenheim, “The Doctors’ Mob’ of 1788” (*Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 1950) 26.

⁹⁰ Quoted in: *Ibid* 26.

unsurprising if it had occurred), but to the commodification, literal objectification, and reduction of beings that were once living into inert nonliving parts—specimens to be studied rather than community members, loved ones, beings a part of spiritual communities/practices, etc. I want to be clear though, that this is not a matter of human beings rendered in/unhuman by the act of ethnomedical dissection, rather it is the fact of these nonliving bodies’ in/unhumanity in the first place—the bodies of Black folks, poor folks, those convicted of crimes, and other social undesirables—that made them available for ethnomedical dissection, and therefore available for the kind of objectification, specimen-izing, and studiability indexed by the word “merchandise,” in the first place.

The second clause in the citation, *more than for the purpose of improvement of anatomy*, also warrants further reflection, as perhaps this is a moment where we can glimpse the lysing of a telos of progressive western ethnomedicine, if only for a moment. What the anonymous author of this editorial seems to be hinting at here, is that they perhaps do not buy wholesale the argument that this practice of dissection is doing what the great men of western ethnomedicine are saying it is. This clause in the sentence seems to function as an accusation that the white men who call themselves doctors are not actually improving upon anatomy by stealing and dissecting bodies, that there is something else operating here—though while we in the present might have an idea as to what that something else might be (the circulation of an antiBlack adaptive truth-for, perhaps), the author of this paper does not elaborate, and it feels precarious and slippery to impose such meaning from this temporal distance. Moreover and in a broader sense, this statement—whatever it may have meant to the writer at the time—pushes back against an already consolidating idea that doctors knew best, that doctors were endowed with special training and reasoning skills that

meant that they alone could evaluate the usefulness of the practice of dissection, and that lay people could not possibly understand because they simply were not intellectually equipped to.

There are conflicting accounts about how the riot began, but all of them revolve around one such lay-person, in some accounts a child, seeing something they were not supposed to. In a secondary source by Jules Calvin Ladenheim written for the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, a group of young boys were playing outside the hospital in lower Manhattan where doctors inside were in the process of dissecting a cadaver.⁹¹ In Ladenheim's retelling, one of the young boys leaned a ladder against the side of the building so as to see the proceedings and was met with a gory scene that included dismembered body parts being manhandled by physicians. Accounts that Ladenheim had collected from primary sources then diverge: either the boy simply saw a severed arm through the window, the severed arm was waved at the boy by one of the physicians, or the severed arm was waved at the boy followed by the taunt that the arm belonged to his mother, who had happened to have died only a few days before.⁹² The riot itself was touched off by the deceased mother. According to Ladenheim, the boy went to find his father, and he and others around went to check the gravesite of the mother only to find that her casket had been dug up and the body had in fact been taken.⁹³ Against the backdrop of months of debates played out in newspaper editorials around the immorality of stealing and dissecting bodies, the boy—seemingly a symbol of innocence—had seen something he was not supposed to see, had told someone about it, and now there was a mob marching back to the hospital to demand answers. The mob, gaining steam and participants, broke into the hospital, into the

⁹¹ Ladenheim, "The Doctors' Mob' of 1788," 29.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.* 30.

dissecting rooms, and met with the sight of multiple incompletely dissected bodies, did what a mob does: said no to this scene with their bodies.⁹⁴

The details of the destruction—what was destroyed on which day and to what extent—is largely irrelevant, only to say that it happened. Multiple hospitals in New York were ransacked. The riot lasted multiple days and at points grew to over five thousand people.⁹⁵ Doctors specifically became targets of the riot and had to be whisked by the mayor and multiple sheriffs to jail for their own protection, but the riot continued to come for them anyway. Ladenheim writes, “The fracas was sufficiently threatening to convince the authorities that the disturbance should be met with a show of force,”⁹⁶ and so a militia was assembled that apparently included Alexander Hamilton himself, and they encircled the fracas encircling the jail. Shots were fired and eight or more people were killed, and this show of military force eventually ‘restored order.’ Interestingly, in his section entitled “Aftermath,” Ladenheim connects this riot with the fact that at the time in 1788, the constitution had not yet been adopted and delegates were at that moment in Philadelphia debating the document’s formulation. He writes, “there can be no doubt that the furor of the recent events aroused grave misapprehensions in the minds of many as to the wisdom of entrusting the government to the hands of an unselected body of people which in their opinion could be equated with ‘the mob.’”⁹⁷

I am interested in what it would mean here to thread this grave misapprehension as to the wisdom of the unselected mob into this larger tapestry we have been weaving so as to understand what Sylvia Wynter calls the selected and the dysselected. Might we understand this fear of the

⁹⁴ Ladenheim, “‘The Doctors’ Mob’ of 1788,” 30.

⁹⁵ Ibid 33.

⁹⁶ Ibid 32.

⁹⁷ Ibid 39.

“unselected” mob as bound up in the ethnomedical disdain for the layperson—those who could not understand the exalted necessity of ethnomedical dissection because they had not been initiated into the doctoring profession? Could we then connect this further to our discussion of the western university? That there exists studiable populations that must be pathologized in order to be saved from their condition—those who must be found, known, quantified, and circulated through the academy in order to be translated into policy in a way that perhaps ontologically resembles the dissection of a cadaver and the passing around of body parts in glass jars in order to learn something? And can we understand the specially trained scholarly agents who alone have the tools to engage in this work along the lines of a doctor who alone understands the human body or the statesman who alone understands how to govern the unselected mob?

In thinking these things alongside each other can we trace the contours of a morbid universe in which the unselected mob slips into the studiable population, spills over onto those laypeople who might also be called ‘patients’? And can we conceive of these slippages and spillages along the lines of Sylvia Wynter’s concept of selection and dysselection, operationalized by a particular overdetermination of Man in which ‘human’ is an unevenly distributed categorization dependent on a logic of antiBlackness and ableism to become coherent? What I am circling around here, is the contention that fear of the mob, disdain for the patient, and need to study the other are all representations of the politics of being that is the focus of this thesis, and that its triangulation through multiple sites and iterations allows us to see their interconnection and codependence, allow us a fuller understanding of the morbid universe.

Circling back to the riot itself, it is my contention that the Medical Riots of 1788 constitute a moment of medical abolition: a moment in which the unselected mob insisted that something was wrong, a moment in which a certain politics of being—one in which certain

members of society were available for disinterment and dissection—was refused. In the storming and ransacking of hospitals, the authority bestowed upon ethnomedicine was momentarily discarded and deemed irrelevant—perhaps we might conceptualize it as a moment in which the mob asserted a particular right to know, a right to lean a ladder up against the window and peer into the dissection room, a right to decide whether this practice aligned with their worldviews. In claiming this riot as a moment of medical abolition, I wish to articulate a call for medical abolition as a demand to assert the right to decide whether ethnomedicine aligns with our worldviews, a demand to not take for granted this system as omnipotent or extrahuman or *fait accompli*.

I understand that the concept of abolishing ethnomedicine is sure to provoke a wide range of reactions, and to this end I wish to explicate my positionality in taking up such a call. I am wholly reliant on western ethnomedicine to survive, and if I were to suddenly refuse treatment in the name of making a principled stance I would die. I would die *tomorrow*. In this way, my call for medical abolition comes from inside the house, so to speak, from inside the hospital, inside the circle of ethnomedicine. I do not judge this system as an outsider. Moreover, I attended nursing school for three years between 2014 and 2017 and so I have also been trained to think like an ethnomedical professional, trained to judge myself and the world around me to the measure of ethnomedicine. This is not to say that I am uniquely qualified to make a call for medical abolition, as this would be to make myself a doctor of medical abolition, but that I am perhaps one of those uniquely able to understand the complexity in doing so—the complexity that is most likely the source of the wide range of reactions circulating a call for ethnomedicine provokes.

It is not that I am calling for the abolition of life-sustaining and lifesaving medical interventions, but for a radical examination of the politics of being undergirding western ethnomedicine as a humanly created and culturally, spatially, and temporally situated practice—an examination in service of the idea that a politics of being that did something other than rely on an overdetermination of Man would yield a radically different kind of ethnomedicine. A kind of ethnomedicine that was in fact so different from western ethnomedicine that it was wholly unrecognizable from that which we have now, that it could no longer be called ‘western medicine’ because of the ontological distance we had traveled from the original referent. As an aside, by medical abolition I also do not mean simply replacing of white western ethnomedicine with a more ‘holistic’ medicine, or with a medicine that is not western/colonial, though that kind of work may be a crucial component nested under a medical abolitionist framework. My focus in this thesis is on an ontological approach to abolition rather than an epistemological one—in other words, how is a contemporary ontology of ethnomedicine, rooted as it is in an antiBlack and ableist adaptive truth-for, incompatible with our livingness as in/un/nonhumans, those who are not quite human enough when held up to the yardstick of Man.

When I have surgery, my eyelids are taped shut once I have been ‘put under’—an interesting euphemism for being chemically rendered into a type of living cadaver, stripped completely of agency and autonomy, made into a literal object to be moved, invaded, cut, rearranged and put back together. If you were to ask a doctor or nurse as to the reason why patients’ eyes are taped shut during surgery, they would describe to you the medical necessity. They would tell you that it is to prevent any potential dust or debris from irritating or damaging the eye—an unintended iatrogenic consequence that insurance would then be obligated to pay for. Patients are not generally told about this practice, not generally allowed to know, and the only

reason I know myself is because I asked my mom once when I was a child why my eyelids were sticky with adhesive after I had come out of surgery. I am interested here in how this moment and this practice constitute a moment of in/un/dehumanization that traverses along the lines of an antiBlack politics of being, the ways in which the early ethnomedical practice of dissecting cadavers and experimenting upon living Black bodies becomes an ontological thread pulled forward in time and manifested as the practice of taping the patient's eyes shut without their knowledge or consent. While this is a seemingly small and inconsequential act, perhaps read as harmless in the grand scheme of things, I am interested—perhaps in a way that is beyond the scope of this thesis—in the ways in which much of a practice and performance of contemporary ethnomedicine is contingent upon such acts of in/un/dehumanization, a contingency that is ontologically reliant on Man and his overdetermination.

A project or a framework of medical abolition, in my view, concatenates and puts pressure on the other sites I have explored in this thesis: lysis, humanness, the act of study and the specious statist/colonialist academic drive to know, the ways in which we are able and not able to think about Blackness and disability together, about disability as a site of dispossession operationalized by an antiBlack ontological schema and the ways in which an ultranormative strand of disability studies forecloses our ability to explore this possibility. A project and a framework of medical abolition asks us to both unravel and thread together simultaneously; it asks us to be deeply cynical and hopelessly utopian in the same moment. In thinking medical abolition rather than 'healthcare reform' I am asking us not only about what is being practiced now, but how these practices have been pulled forward through time, about the foundation on which these practices sit.

“So you notice we’re now saying that social uprisings have tremendous links to the transformation of knowledge,”⁹⁸ Sylvia Wynter says in an interview with Katherine McKitterick in *Sylvia Wynter, On Being Human as Praxis*. Following Sylvia Wynter I contend that ‘western medicine’ as an ethnomedicine has been created by Man, specifically by an overdetermined Man, and as such it can be created differently and otherwise. Sylvia Wynter tells us that, “we continue to know our present order of social reality, and rigorously so, in the adaptive ‘truth-for’ terms needed to conserve our present descriptive statement.”⁹⁹ At base, in circulating a call for medical abolition I am circulating a call for an otherwise descriptive statement, an otherwise politics of being that does not privilege a colonial, racist, ableist, heteropatriarchal rendering of Man—one that we can see at work in all of the other sites of this thesis. I am putting out a call that demands we view our present order of social reality differently. The Medical Riots of 1788 is one such example of a social uprising with the potential to transform knowledge, and, following Ariella Aisha Azoulay, by refusing to see the moment of the riot as closed or past we are able to reanimate a potential future in which the moment of this riot continues to be able to lead us to the transformation of knowledge.

To leave this thesis the way I came in: “But if we listen to them they will say: come, let’s plan something together. And that’s what we’re going to do. *We’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anyone else.*”¹⁰⁰ My intention in this thesis has been to engage in something more like planning than like scholarship. Something that, rather than being interdisciplinary in the sense that we are wedding or welding two discrete disciplines together, is undisciplined. It is my contention that actively disregarding and refusing a disciplinary mode of scholarship allows us to

⁹⁸ McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter, On Being Human As Praxis*, 28.

⁹⁹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality,” 270.

¹⁰⁰ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 68, emphasis mine.

better trace the contours of a particular morbid universe—to weave strands into threads that we can pick up and follow. My hope is that an un- and antidisciplinary scholarly method has yielded something both generative and illegible in the sense that a normative mode of sense-making is perhaps part of the problem, in the sense that asking legible questions that yield definite answers means that those answers can and most certainly will be used against us. What would it mean to find generativity in unanswerable questions or unsolvable problems? What would it mean to travel far and get nowhere? How can we ensure that we are misunderstood and yet felt deeply? What would it mean to cocreate a politics of being in our own image, as the ones who are never quite human enough? *We're telling all of you but we're not telling anyone else.*

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