

Sensing Blackness, or: the (Racial) Difference of the Same

Daniel Zheng

Abstract: This paper stages an encounter between the notion of *différance* in Jacques Derrida or Jean-Luc Nancy and various theorizations of blackness by Christina Sharpe, Achille Mbembe, and David Marriott. I suggest that *différance* offers a useful framework for understanding the claim to “ontological blackness” in Sharpe and Marriott that troubles the boundary between, on the one hand, the essentializing logic of racial difference in its colonial guise, and on the other, the universal humanism in Mbembe which erases blackness as merely a non-ontological historical fantasy. *Différance* allows one to treat racial difference as, in Nancy’s words, the “difference of the same,” escaping the reductive logic of both difference and universalism. Throughout the paper, I trace a line of *différance* across the way that Sharpe and Marriott explore blackness. For Sharpe, this emerges from her description of “anagrammatical” or “annotated” blackness, where blackness is defined by its shifting definition and interpretation that always defers any essentialized meaning, and thus where it forms an “excess” close to Nancy’s understanding of the excess or “suspended step” of sense. I then take this argument one step further through a reading of a Derridean logic in the work of David Marriott, who contends that blackness, properly speaking, can never appear as anything but a negation. In this way, blackness operates through precisely its place of non-presence or perpetual erasure and deferral, and *différance* offers a helpful corrective in “making sense” of this blackness that can never appear. I therefore contend that *différance* opens toward a properly liberatory logic of blackness that follows its own tracks and cannot be essentialized into “universalism” of “difference” since it never truly arrives as such.

Introduction

Near the end of his *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe seems to identify a contradiction between two of his central interlocutors, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon: “What did he [Césaire] mean by ‘Black’ (Nègre), this return to the name that Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks*, said was only a fiction?”¹ Or, to put it in other words, if thinkers like Fanon highlighted how racial difference was merely a fantasy imposed upon black people utilized to separate and subjugate them, then why did black discourse remain so invested in maintaining this concept of “blackness?”

Mbembe’s answer to this dilemma is that a project like *Négritude* remains a fundamentally *historical* one, seeking to recuperate the concept of blackness as merely a stepping stone on the way toward the reality of an absolute and universal humanism. Césaire and other thinkers of blackness used the term, Mbembe explains, as a method that “embraces the fiction”² of race, but does so exclusively historically and projects itself toward a future without the need for its fantasy. “Positive difference,” in Mbembe’s terms, is thus “fundamentally an orientation toward the future,”³ a future in which we all share the world as equal humans defined by our essential and inherent humanity.

But implied by this orientation toward the future is a neatness wherein blackness, or racial difference writ large, is something that exists only to be expunged later. As a historical project on the side of both oppressor and oppressed, the endpoint of Mbembe’s thought is the notion that one aspires, in the final analysis, to only and always *forget blackness*. But to be as practical as possible, does this smoothing over of difference in favor of a universal humanity not inherently re-open the door for racist discourse? That is to say, is it wise to orient oneself towards a dispensing of the category of a liberatory blackness given, well, the entirety of the history that Mbembe systematically outlines in his book?

David Marriott, in his review of *Critique of Black Reason*, puts this problematic in philosophical terms, asking whether a European humanism, which from the beginning assumed the inhumanity of blackness, can ever be the solution to anti-blackness: “it seems more plausible to say that the limits of critique have always already begun, were always already twisted and distorted by the desire to see blackness as a primordial difference within the human, and thus cannot be, and never could be, overcome in the humanistic ways Mbembe suggests.”⁴ Marriott thinks that Mbembe crucially misreads Fanon, in that black thought for Fanon must always “*refuse* everything that Europe has to offer—a point that Fanon insisted on when he said that black invention must go beyond the mere mimicry of European humanism’s promissory structure.”⁵ Christina Sharpe expresses a similar sentiment when she remarks that “I am not interested in rescuing Black being(s)

1 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Duke University Press, 2017), 159.

2 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 89.

3 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 94.

4 David Marriott, “The Becoming-Black of the World?: On Achille Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason*,” *Radical Philosophy* 202 (2018): 66.

5 Marriott, “The Becoming-Black of the World?” 71.

for the category of the ‘Human’ . . . [that] continue to produce our fast and slow deaths.”⁶

Debates about Fanon aside, we may say, without doubt, that Mbembe’s conception of blackness has little to do with any ontology of racial difference, even though white colonial narratives declared blackness a fundamentally *ontological* lack by “comparing humans to animals”⁷ and describing black subjects as “trapped in a lesser form of being.”⁸ We can see this in Mbembe’s description of the “becoming-black of the world,” where blackness, in today’s merging between “animism and capitalism,”⁹ is generalized and spread out across the world, “institutionalized as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet.”¹⁰ Blackness thus becomes severed from its racial origin in Mbembe, representing a newly capacious quality of being defined by the technological and economic structure of our present. But again: does moving the concept of blackness away from a concept of race not inherently brush over the very real and continuing racial disparities of today?

The purpose of this paper is not to adjudicate over biological conceptions or narratives of racial difference, which often leads to overly reductive or misconstrued terrain.¹¹ Instead, it seeks to inquire into the explicit *ontologies* of blackness expressed in the discourse of other black writers and thinkers who treat blackness as something more substantive than Mbembe’s future-oriented disavowal of the concept. Sharpe, for example, shares Mbembe’s concern of blackness as something historically constructed, but suggests, crucially, that the “annotative” practices of Black artists and thinkers in the wake of this history carve out a new *ontology* of blackness: “Annotation appears like that asterisk, which is itself an annotation mark, that marks the trans*formation into ontological blackness.”¹² A quick glance at other book titles by various black thinkers reveals a similar trend, revolving around the intersection between, in various configurations, “Blackness” and “Being.”¹³

The point of this long-winded introduction is to suggest the intervention of this paper—that the application of the theories of Jean-Luc Nancy or Jacques Derrida might offer a corrective in navigating (or “deconstructing,” perhaps) between the dichotomy of the white fantasy of race and its essentializing difference on one side, and Mbembe’s universal humanism on the other. To speak, then, of the too-obvious pun in words: this essay proposes not a discussion of racial difference but of racial *différance*. Specifically, the framework of *différance*—Jacques Derrida’s description of how “every concept is

inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of difference”¹⁴—offers a way to understand racial difference as neither subsumed into a universal or homogenous unity nor able to be essentialized into straightforwardly racist discourse. I suggest that this framework resonates closely with the work of black thinkers like Sharpe, Marriott, and Selamawit Terrefe who hold onto a conception of blackness as never static, never complete, or perhaps even never present. That is to say, blackness thought in its difference and its deferral can never fully arrive or fully appear—and in this way, exists as a liberatory *excess*, a (non)being unable to be put back as a static term into the set or framework it came from.

A “sketchy summary of an elucidation of *différance*”¹⁵ (and Blackness)

“*Différance*,” writes Jacques Derrida, “is neither a word nor a concept,”¹⁶ but “rather the possibility of conceptuality.”¹⁷ As a concept, a constructed term (by all parties—the colonial project but also Césaire, Sharpe and so on), blackness is, if we are to take Derrida at his (non)concept, always inherently composed through the play of *différance*—that structure where “the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called ‘present’ element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself.”¹⁸ This, of course, may be a fundamental, if basic, conclusion that underlies the points that follow in the rest of this paper: whatever blackness “is,” is constructed discursively through interactions with other words or concepts. And as such, blackness can never be a static term—its “meaning,” if one can even speak of something like that, is constantly re-negotiating itself within the conceptual chains of *différance*. But the general ambiguity of this claim feels inherently unworkable, so let’s continue forward to a more specific engagement between the two ideas emerging here in the encounter between *différance* and Christina Sharpe’s idea of “black annotation.”¹⁹

Sharpe’s conception of blackness, “annotated,” highlights that the purpose of annotated blackness is to be “anagrammatical.” More explicitly, it’s “anagrammatical in the literal sense as when ‘a word, phrase, or name is formed by rearranging the letters of another.’”²⁰ As an anagrammatical structure, blackness thus always offers new interpretations: “grammatical gender falls away and new meanings proliferate . . . a secret message is discovered through the rearranging of the letters of a text.”²¹ Sharpe’s point is that blackness is never static—following Hortense Spillers, she suggests that black bodies, when reduced to commodities, become “bodies emptied of self-interpretation,

6 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 116.

7 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 30.

8 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 17.

9 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 4.

10 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 6.

11 See Kim TallBear’s article “Genomic Articulations of Indigeneity” on this point.

12 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 116.

13 Sharpe’s book is subtitled “On Blackness and Being,” David Marriott’s book *Whither Fanon?* is subtitled “Studies in the Blackness of Being,” Alexander Weheliye is writing on “Schwarz-Sein,” and so on.

14 Jacques Derrida, “*Différance*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 11.

15 This is a reusing of a gesture from Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 36.

16 Derrida, “*Différance*,” 8.

17 Derrida, “*Différance*,” 11.

18 Derrida, “*Différance*,” 13.

19 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 77.

20 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 76.

21 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 76.

into which new interpretations could be placed,²² re-formed as an “index of violability and also potentiality.”²³ As an anagrammatical structure, then, the ungendered black body engages in a structure similar to *différance*, where its meaning is not fixed, where letters are rearranged, and thus where the signification of blackness slips away and always defers any “ultimate” meaning. Anagrammatical blackness therefore takes, in Derrida’s words, “a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will,’”²⁴ that thus suspends the “mechanism of fantasy”²⁵ that turns black bodies into commodities—instead carving out a new conception of blackness that indefinitely postpones the answer to the simple question demanded incessantly: “What is blackness?”

For Sharpe, blackness thus is better represented as a figure of *excess* or “signifying surplus,”²⁶ which she attempts to render using the term “Trans*.”²⁷ For Sharpe, the Trans* is a way to visualize how “Black has always been that excess,”²⁸ that the signifying surplus and excess contained within the term “Black” once again holds a double move between a destruction of “normal” meaning and an opening to new interpretations. The signifying surplus, or excess of blackness, exemplifies for Sharpe “the failure of words and concepts to hold in and on Black flesh,”²⁹ that process in which “meaning slides, signification slips, when words like *child*, *girl*, *mother*, and *boy* abut blackness.”³⁰ These terms, she highlights, are rendered distant from their former meaning when placed alongside the uber-signifier of blackness, such that “*girl* doesn’t mean ‘girl’ but, for example, ‘prostitute’ or ‘felon.’”³¹ But again, the double-move: the capaciousness of this excess of blackness which contains “annotations” (prostitute, felon) that underlie it, allows for the insertion of new annotations, new conceptions of blackness, a process of “redaction and annotation toward seeing and reading otherwise.”³²

Blackness, therefore, in Hortense Spillers’s words, is defined by its “enforced state of breach,”³³ where it can be invaded or subtended at any moment by an excess of both subjugating force and liberatory annotation. Is this not also the necessary implication of *différance*? That is to say, an “enforced state of breach” reflects Derrida’s logic of the trace—that every word, concept or state contains echoes and traces of what it does not mean, where each term is breached in this way with the non-present trace of its excess or difference.³⁴ Derrida writes, “There is no breach without difference and no difference

without trace.”³⁵ We might say that this uncontainable excess that seems to define blackness for Sharpe exposes a logic of the trace inherent in its formulation, where blackness is supplemented, from the start, with a dual-sided violent and liberatory surfeit that subtends it. And again, then, when Sharpe argues for something like the “annotational” project of “reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame,”³⁶ we hear the echoes of Derrida’s famous “there is nothing outside of the text,” where, when blackness is concerned, the excess outside of the frame is precisely what *must be used* by black thinkers to understand it. To read blackness “in excess of what is caught in the frame” is to refuse the view of the potentate which delimits the black subject as cut off cleanly by an inscribed border of commodification and denial of humanity. It is, in the words of Toni Morrison, quoted by Sharpe, a way “to carve away the accretions of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis, and sheer malevolence embedded in raced language so that other kinds of perception were not only available but were inevitable.”³⁷ A reading of excess as *inevitability* is one that accounts for the trace, the supplement, and the entire logic of *différance* which underlies the co-construction of blackness with an innumerable and excessive slate of annotations of both violation and potential. In “the wake,” the presence of blackness is defined by its deferred presence, an excess that imposes itself such that it is always still coming, still arriving.

If, as marked earlier, the Trans* for Sharpe posits or exemplifies this “trans*formation into ontological blackness,”³⁸ we might say that the move from a conceptual blackness to an ontological blackness draws our course from the essentially Derridean terrain of meaning and signification closer to the logic of Jean-Luc Nancy’s ontological conception of sense.³⁹ For Nancy, rather than merely refer to constructions of meaning, *sense*⁴⁰ itself is structured through the logic of *différance*: “Being senses itself

which hints toward a central element of violence of the term “enforced,” which I will try to get to later in the section on David Marriott.

35 Derrida, “Différance,” 18.

36 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 117.

37 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 117.

38 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 116.

39 This is probably not so precise, Derrida himself would argue that *différance* is the precondition for any ontology, but nonetheless I think the general point holds (Nancy is more interested in *différance* and being, Derrida more meaning).

40 For Nancy, “sense” is to be understood as the very phenomenological idea of “sensation” (or as an opening to the world, hence its “archi-significance”), but this “sense” also encapsulates or traverses all of “the five senses, the sense of direction, common sense, semantic sense, divinatory sense, sentiment, moral sense, practical sense, aesthetic sense” (*The Sense of the World*, 15). One way to understand Nancy’s use of the term is to note that the book begins by describing a “crisis of sense” (2) spurred on by the collapse of two previous concepts of sense—myth/religion (given sense) and nihilism (loss of sense). From this crisis, Nancy reaffirms sense hesitantly by noting the banal statement that “it is *necessary indeed* that there be something like a sense of the

22 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 29.
 23 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 75.
 24 Derrida, “Différance,” 8.
 25 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 114.
 26 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 80.
 27 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 30.
 28 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 30.
 29 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 123.
 30 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 80.
 31 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 77.
 32 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 117.
 33 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 77.
 34 What I’m leaving out here is the crucial difference made in the term “enforced,”

deferring and differing. It senses itself or knows itself to be differing and different.”⁴¹ Between the dual poles of myth or religion (given sense) and the abyss of nihilism (a loss of sense), Nancy wants to suggest instead that sense should be understood as spacing and *différance*, a sense always spaced out between singularities, or what he repeatedly refers to as “the difference of the same,”⁴² a sense that is always ongoing and deferred rather than completed. This sense, then, structured through the play of *différance*, is one of “nonsignificance or archi-significance,”⁴³ where its orientation toward the world takes place before signifier or signified come into play.⁴⁴

We might suggest that this nonsignifying logic of Nancy’s description of sense and its occupation of the “suspended step” mirrors Sharpe’s understanding of ontological blackness as trans*, as if blackness exists precisely at the nonsignifying point of sense (for Sharpe, this is the asterisk) that the step of thought passes over. That is to say, in a thought of blackness, the step of thought does not pass straight into a signification of blackness (“blackness is ___”) but rather remains too suspended over the “sense” of blackness, which is the very condition of possibility for any signification at all. This delicate ontology suggests that racial difference might be inscribed (or *exscribed*) into the moment of existence—the primordial opening toward the world or the “irreducible strangeness of each one of these touches to the other.”⁴⁵ This understanding of blackness at this moment of sense prior to signification might highlight why Sharpe remains invested in a notion of blackness as “that excess.” A blackness explored through the “absolute excess of sense”⁴⁶ is in the same breath one that is always *more* than what can be turned into signification—an annotated excess that comes always *before* the subsequently essentialized formulations of “what blackness is,” *before* the boundaries are marked out in the dehumanizing frame.

The asterisk in Sharpe, this void of blackness wherein “meaning slides, signification slips,” therefore occupies something like Nancy’s description of the asignifying sense of

world (or *some* sense in the world)” (7)—tentatively, then, going back to sense in all of its meanings, but also “simply” to the very basic idea of being an opening to the world, to occupy this infinitely slight gap between myth and nihilism.

41 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 35.

42 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 8.

43 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 9.

44 Différance is relevant to sense because it poses the question of “spacing” (the spaces between signs, overly simply put)—if sense is understood not merely phenomenologically, but as structured too via this spacing of singularities, then this is how it occupies this “infinitely slight” place. Différance implies a constant breakdown of significations and forming of new ones, which Nancy wants to think at the heart of sense and nonsense: “[the common space of sense] is nothing but the limit that separates and mixes at once the insignificance that arises out of the pulverization of significations and the nonsignificance or archi-significance encountered by the need of being-toward-the-world” (*The Sense of the World*, 8).

45 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 6.

46 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 24.

the monolith in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a structure that offers “something like an instance or indication of sense” because it refuses to signify in its “smooth, hard, surface,” existing only as a “presence of an absence,” while still interpellating through its “signal, call, or intimation.”⁴⁷ Like the monolith, the asterisk in Sharpe’s trans* calls out to the reader, but it does so *before* it signifies or suggests a signifying absence in its opaque formal orthography. Sharpe writes, “The asterisk after the prefix ‘trans’ holds the place open for thinking.”⁴⁸ It functions as a “means to mark the ways the slave and the Black occupy what Saidiya Hartman calls the ‘position of the unthought.’”⁴⁹ In other words, the asterisk of Trans* occupies in Nancy’s framework the suspended step of sense, as if it expresses in punctuation “*the step of thought suspended over this sense that has already touched us.*”⁵⁰ In this way, Hartman’s “unthought” both “initiates and terminates” any thought of blackness, at once begging to be thought (*what does this * mean?*) and at once remaining, without fail, still necessarily unthought. We are touched by something we might call “blackness,” or perhaps when we attempt to formulate something like what blackness is, we remain posterior to “*this sense that has already touched us.*”⁵¹

If in having suggested that blackness takes its place (perhaps by necessity) within Nancy’s transcendental structure of sense, we find ourselves stuck at a mirror of Nancy’s “there is no longer anything here to be said,” where blackness lies in its ultimate essence away from, behind, before, or at the very opening of the possibility of signification, and where thus there is no use speaking about it.⁵² Facing this philosophical impasse, one should re-stress, above all, that, where blackness is concerned, many people have many (terrible) things to say. What I mean is that the disappearance of blackness to a philosophically mythical locus at the very opening of signification would play, we might note, rather well into the hands of racist discourse that claims that what is “black” absolutely does not signify, that is denoted by an absolute nonbeing. And, in a rather similar way, Fanon’s famous “*Tiens, un Nègre!*” in which the black subject is subjectified, offers something akin to a racialized interpellation which occurs, too, *prior* to any signification.⁵³ This is Marriott’s point in his essay “Blackness: N’est Pas?” where in the “*Tiens*” episode “the signifier (and not the sign nor the gaze) acts as the unconscious confirmation and reminder that one is *already* racially subjected.”⁵⁴ What I want to note here is the term “already” in Marriott’s reading of Fanon, the very same *already* as Nancy’s “the sense that has *already* touched us.” As soon as the black subject is able to formulate the encounter as signification, they are *already* touched by their having-been-constructed as racial subject, such that

47 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 39.

48 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 30.

49 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 30.

50 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 11.

51 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 11.

52 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 79.

53 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, 2008), 82.

54 David Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” *Propter Nos* 4 (2020): 30. Emphasis mine.

“the discovery of one’s racial difference is always a belated discovery.”⁵⁵ The belated or deferred temporality of the moment of sense here does not, then, offer a pathway between the dualism of essentialized difference and universal humanism, but merely reinscribes the ideology of racial difference into the structure of sense. In Fanon’s terms, this is the too-late discovery of an already internal “historico-racial schema”⁵⁶ *beneath* the body, sketched by “the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories”⁵⁷—a racist subjectification already inscribed always in advance of its passage into legible meaning that parallels Nancy’s structure of sense.

Where to go, then, from here? In a moment where he prescribes error to his text, or perhaps a moment when his discourse “can reveal itself to be sick,”⁵⁸ Nancy writes that his “sketchy summary of an elucidation of *différance* is still a bit too phenomenological-constitutive.”⁵⁹ In our terms, we might say that this “sensuous” interpellating movement of blackness that precedes signification is, similarly, a bit too phenomenological, which attempts to express *différance* through a positive presence that itself is already compromised in the racial-phenomenological analysis of Fanon. Rather, as Nancy continues, “The *coming* (but is there ‘the’ coming, and not rather a ‘to come’ that comes without allowing of substantialization?) demands something else.”⁶⁰ To render blackness expressed as the positive term “blackness” is thus to substantialize what a proper logic of *différance* would maintain as a blackness-to-come rather than “a” or “the” blackness. To speak of *différance* is after all, for Derrida, not a question of positive terms but of negative ones: “a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*.”⁶¹ To continue tracing these parallels between blackness and *différance*, we should move past Sharpe’s positive conception of blackness⁶² (blackness *is* anagrammatical, *is* annotated, and so on) to Marriott’s more radical formulation in “Blackness: N’est Pas?” where he suggests that blackness can instead only ever be defined always as negation, nonbeing, such that “blackness cannot be uttered without at once being echoed by a voice that is not: n’est pas.”⁶³

(This) Blackness which is Not

Marriott’s point, drawing off Fanon’s “le Noir n’est pas un homme,”⁶⁴ is that blackness is always structured as this *n’est pas* or form of negation. Blackness as such can

55 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 31.

56 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 84.

57 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 84.

58 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 80.

59 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 36.

60 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 36.

61 Derrida, “Différance,” 11.

62 To be fair, Sharpe does often use a term like blackness’s non/being to highlight the dual sided perspective of this, although I would still suggest that even the use of the slash highlights an attempt to substantialize.

63 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 27.

64 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 27.

therefore never *appear* as anything but negativity, a statement of which it is not, such that black subjects “have to assume a being that is not in order to be recognized as subjects.”⁶⁵ As soon as “blackness” is substantialized, we might say, it is struck with the inversion that it “is not,” or it is struck with this negation prior to the level of substantiation, such that it can never be a positive term. As Marriott writes, “to make it [blackness] into an *is* rather than an *is not*, is always preceded (structurally and epistemologically, says Fanon) by the moment of negrophobic interpellation.”⁶⁶ This non-being is inscribed not merely at the level of signification, then, but on a structural level deeper, something closer to that of sense, where “*the black is made to be non-being rather than an inauthentic failure to be*.”⁶⁷ Which is to say, blackness is on one level structurally *forced into being*, “being-made-to-be”⁶⁸—but only such that it can inevitably be assimilated to, paradoxically, the *negated* inscription that this being is always and forever non-being.

Of course, the Derridean would respond: but this is the structure of all meaning, or all ontology even, that there is only the play of “differences without positive terms.” But the difference that makes the difference here is that *this difference* (blackness) is struck each time with violence when it comes—a violence that is both literal and discursive. At the level of discourse, this violence occurs in the implicit assertion that, where race is concerned, whiteness is the positive term par excellence, and blackness is condemned to the structure of its negation. Marriott thus explains: “blackness has no articulation, for even its difference is borrowed; the result is a language whose idiom is that of a *n’est pas*.”⁶⁹ Under this logic, whiteness—which is indexed always to the basic and universal ontology of what it means to “be human”—does have a substantial articulation of its own that does not depend on its difference from difference to function. Thus, as Selamawit Terrefe, riffing off Marriott, puts it, “The incapacity of its [blackness’s] signification within and beyond the paradigms of meaning and measure persist violently, expiating psychic blows indistinguishable from those that punctuate matter.”⁷⁰ Within this framework, blackness is precisely defined by its failure to signify or exist phenomenally.

If the solution to this situation seems like it should be something akin to Mbembe’s humanism, where one simply places this non-being as a historical condition to be overcome via a re-granting of the “being” of humanity to the black subject, Marriott would caution against the very construction of this universality. Rather, his proposition is that this negation is inscribed into the very structure of the “universal,” such that blackness itself cannot take any place within a universal—it is conceived of as the very negative of the universal as such. Thus, blackness remains for Marriott “incomprehensible to both reason and ontology as traditionally understood (by which I mean: the white rhetoric of

65 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 31.

66 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 41.

67 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 34.

68 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 34.

69 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 31.

70 Selamawit Terrefe, “Black Surfeit, Black Grief: Not of Meaning nor Measure.”

Political Theology (2023): 2.

universality).⁷¹ This is why Marriott is suspicious of Mbembe’s conclusion, because in his gesture to forget blackness, Mbembe proposes a scenario in which there can only be a singular universal (the human) that the black subject will always still be the negative, the non-being of. In a similar way, Marriott thus also argues that blackness can never properly speaking be described via a phenomenology because its “existence” is always effaced upon arrival.

As an inscribed state of negation, Marriott suggests that any attempt to speak about blackness is always struck with a fundamental aporia where it can never appear without being erased or dragged away into fantasy or universality. And so any possibility of a black invention (or anagram, or annotation, in Sharpe’s terminology) has to reckon with the presupposition that blackness “cannot be placed or be made actually present as such.”⁷² It is thus by necessity in this very location of blackness’s *erasure* that one searches for it: “We must try to hear, within this silence, the yet to be understood experience of blackness, in order to pose *the question of its being anew, before its reading can crystallize around the question of what it is, or, as Fanon conceives of it, is not.*”⁷³

Of course, the connection here is that this conception of blackness as unable to take presence, a blackness that must *be* without arriving at “what it is,” reminds one strongly of the logic of sense and *différance*. Beyond the deferred meaning of Sharpe’s blackness, Marriott’s blackness takes this comparison one step further in that it does not ever appear; rather, it is always deferring itself, never coming, never arriving. Nancy’s clarification of a non-phenomenological conception of sense is thus precisely an opening toward something like a way to understand or speak about what Marriott’s blackness could be, where it is structured by its endless deferral and thus (non)presence: “the coming into presence of being takes place precisely as nonarrival of presence.”⁷⁴ In this way, Nancy’s thinking offers a way to make sense of how Marriott’s understanding of a liberatory blackness “makes sense” only in its positioning at the very *edge of sense*, or at its positioning at the perpetually withdrawing excess of sense. As Marriott writes, “the conclusion that race has no immediate knowledge, and can only be approached as the experience of its infinite deferment, is the object of this book.”⁷⁵

To reach something like an understanding of what blackness is (not), one must contend with a conception of blackness that constantly erases itself even as it is produced. But for Marriott, this situation leads toward the same double move that Sharpe and Césaire made, where there is a transformation from a constricting structure into a liberatory potential. A blackness that perpetually effaces itself is also one that is unable to be subsumed back into universalism because it never arrives at a substantial form as such. In the same breath, then, a blackness that perpetually effaces itself is one that perpetually invents itself, becoming an “endless transvaluation, at least in so far as Fanon can say that

in the world through which he travels ‘I am endlessly creating myself.’”⁷⁶ This blackness is thus a “spectrality of black undecidability,”⁷⁷ or what appears to be, for us, a Derridean ghost in the sense of its always non-present presence.

Différance, then, offers a method of reading or liberating blackness within its struggle of erasure through its always-postponed nature. Rendered through the logic of a non-present presence, blackness in this sense can never appear as a positive term (and thus be subsumed into universality), instead taking the structure that Nancy describes: “The coming is infinite: it does not get finished with coming.”⁷⁸ We might say, the “transvaluation” of blackness is infinite, it does not get finished with creating itself. Or, it is a positioning of racial difference at the very edge of the excess of sense and its opening onto “nothing,” where a blackness that must be endlessly invented from its perpetual erasure is also “open on nothing but its own distance from nothing, within nothing, its ‘something’ having been thrown there from nowhere to nowhere,”⁷⁹ the nonarrival of the nothingness that blackness is (not).

Marriott describes this method of writing blackness as a “future imperfect” tense: “a moment of inventiveness whose introduction necessarily never arrives and does not stop arriving, and whose destination cannot be foreseen, or anticipated, but only repeatedly traveled, and is therefore not future at all.”⁸⁰ In this moment, Marriott, describes, nearly explicitly, the temporality of *différance*, where the inventiveness, or perhaps the *coming*, of blackness, is always arriving but never arrives. But, in this same sentence, I think he also begins to open another line of Nancy’s thought, namely, the thought of a destination that is not an end but merely one to be “repeatedly traveled.” That is to say, he begins to open up something like a *world* via Nancy’s logic of the confines of the world where “we touch our limits on all sides.”⁸¹ This black inventiveness is something *radically open* to a world, but open only along the edges of its own differing/deferring tracks—open, in this sense, along the same path as Nancy’s “universe of which the unity is nothing but unicity, open, distended, diffracted, slowed down, differed, and deferred within itself.”⁸² It is thus a formulation where blackness is constituted finally without reference to whiteness or even humanity, but toward the traveling of its own tracks, and thus toward the confines of a world. Oriented but never arriving into the world, following its repeatedly traveled tracks, black invention “gives itself in one stroke, in being *toward the world*, as the arrival of being in advance of itself—differing/deferring—in advance in one stroke, each time, all the way to the confines of the world, present already where it is headed, where it is not.”⁸³

Between the dual poles of racial difference and universal humanism, the world of

71 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 32.

72 David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 122.

73 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 34.

74 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 35.

75 Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, ix–x.

76 Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, 204.

77 Marriott, “Blackness, N’est Pas?” 39.

78 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 35.

79 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 37.

80 Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, 284.

81 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 40.

82 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 37.

83 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 154.

a properly liberatory blackness takes shape through a *différance* that navigates the ever-closing space between the two—where blackness, in its continuously differing/deferring invention, never arrives as such (and thus can never be essentialized, commodified, violated), and at the same time never becomes a universal, heading along its own traces or tracks to the confines and limits that it always touches. Occupying the infinitely slight crevice between the abysses on each side, what blackness “accomplishes as a revelation at each and every moment is repeatable only as its difference from itself.”⁸⁴ This blackness is not, then, a humanism, because it refuses to fall so neatly into a category of the human of which it will always be a negative foil. Yet, if it is a form of difference, this is a difference that can only be thought as a difference, or *différance*, from itself. Differing and deferring from *itself*, racial difference here is rendered, as Nancy likes to say, as merely “the difference of the same.”⁸⁵ Which is to pose, in other words, that this blackness is also by necessity *both* a humanism and a difference, where each side contains traces of the other, where, like with sense and world, humanism and difference make each other make sense. The task then, of black invention, is precisely this—to pull apart the border between humanism and difference, to inhabit the very limit between the two, in order to devise a blackness that is properly liberatory, but which necessarily remains a blackness-to-come.

Works Cited

- Derrida, Jacques. “Différance.” *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Pluto Press, 2008.
- Marriott, David. “The Becoming-Black of the World?: On Achille Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason*.” *Radical Philosophy* 202 (2018): 62–71.
- Marriott, David. *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford University Press, 2018.
- Marriott, David. “Blackness: N’est Pas?” *Propter Nos* 4 (2020): 27–51.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Sense of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- TallBear, Kim. “Genomic Articulations of Indigeneity.” *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 4 (2013): 509–33.
- Terrefe, Selamawit D. “Black Surfeit, Black Grief: Not of Meaning nor Measure.” *Political Theology* (2023): 1–11. Web.

84 Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, ix–x.

85 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 8.