

SHE'S HAVING AN EPISODE: PATRICIA WILLIAMS AND THE WRITING OF DAMAGED LIFE

LAUREN BERLANT*

I. Anecdotal¹

I heard a story once about two friends who were trading tales about the ways that white, male supremacy extends itself formally and informally into sexual reproduction: through structure and stricture; statements and gestures; anecdotes and atmospheres; law and families, and not just white families. The conversation produced so much pain and awkwardness that the friends “grew embarrassed, somehow”; and so, spontaneously, as though it would save the day, they resorted to the language of political theory, of “laissez-faire economics and governmental interventionism,” to get at the situation. But theorizing for life’s sake didn’t work out too well—that time. The abstractions made “a clear line, a railroad upon which all other ideas and events were tied down and sacrificed.”²

A little later I heard a similar story about a godmother and goddaughter who exchanged tales that might also have referred to legacies of sexualized racial violence—that is, *might* have, if the godmother had not insisted on euphemizing how that violence was embodied in her life and why their family, a family harmed by it, would still so identify with and indeed long for access to the white supremacist world. In this case too, the conversation moved away from “the truth” to allegory-spinning, from veracity to “voracity”—for displacement, not escape; but this time the interlocutors moved not toward a professional register. Abjuring the rhetoric of law and the idiom of history, the women spun out fictions of animals with appetites, talking about polar bears until their “plates were full of emptiness and [the goddaughter] became large in the space which described [the godmother’s] emptiness and [the goddaughter] gave in to the emptiness of words.”³

Even now, years later, this second anecdote about the godmother and goddaughter seems more tender and positive than the first one between the collegial theorists, because

* George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor, Department of English, University of Chicago.

1 All anecdotes are taken from Patricia J. Williams, *On Being the Object of Property*, 14 SIGNS 5, 5–24 (1988).

2 *Id.* at 13.

3 *Id.* at 16–17.

the generosity and intimacy of the fairytale is still less harsh than the brutal technicality of a professional jargon whose searing criticality scores its users as well as its objects. Yet both responses to pervasive sexualized racial violence involve intimacy, exchange, optimism, criticality, aversion, disappointment, aggression, and distance—all of it. Each response-style expresses a desperation that seeks at once contact, displacement, transmission, and defense against the prodigious weight of violence *and* possibility. Each sacrifices the potential for mutually facing an overwhelming scene (the *same* one, yet varied) to the abstraction of a speech register that insists on the solidity of representation despite all the evidence that the speakers have failed to achieve even an adequate description of outrageous social relations. So this material, derived from the ordinary of subordination, not only extends the violence it restages, and not only exemplifies what so often goes wrong when we recount power's story with a reparative intention, but, even more disconcertingly, discovers the reproduction of structural violence in intimate conversation, the kind in which people conscript each other to desire a common idiom so as not to feel alone and defeated by life. Here, the preservation of fidelity, the drive to stay in sync with another, beats out the pursuit to extend justice. Each aim takes its own kind of courage.

In an episodic aesthetic, we focus attention on converting a disturbance into a case, a singularity into an exemplum, or an incident into an event, in the hope that this remodeling will transform what there is to see, to engage, and, when it is relevant, what there is to fight in the world.⁴ But, paradoxically, each episode demonstrates an insufficiency of the case as well, as it requires proximity to other scenes and cases for the force of its change to be assessed. This analytic attention to the process of generalization is the only way to change what an object is, how it is to be encountered, contextualized, figured, narrated, and shifted within its own resonating field. Patricia Williams' *On Being the Object of Property* is shaped by this transformational wish and will, both within sections organized by incident and in its overall style of nested, accretive exemplification. The essay's opening, for example, stages Williams' mother relating something about their shared slave past that she wants her daughter now to own with pride, seeking to convert the negativity of history to prophetic victory;⁵ and the daughter, in retelling, converts her hurt and bafflement at her mother's judgment and desire into an anecdote with different exemplary force, this time encapsulating how it comes to be that the corrosive work of the world can turn into a

4 On the process and impact of making exemplary cases, see Lauren Berlant, *On the Case*, 33 CRITICAL INQUIRY 663 (2007).

5 The mother reminds Williams, on the cusp of law school, that her great-great-grandmother was owned by a lawyer, Austen Miller, who reproduced with the eleven year old girl and begat generations of black mothers down to Williams' own, suggesting non-ironically that the law is her inheritance, her right, because it is *in her blood*. Williams, *supra* note 1, at 5–6.

constricting double-bind when delivered in the context of love.

But such constraints grow not only from the intimate zones of inheritance, where staying tethered to familiar others maintains the most durable world we know. Williams' essay also absorbs many kinds of incidents among strangers, neighbors, and institutions—from the random assault of a gaze on the street to a major occasion in relation to law. So, for instance, Williams relates an episode of reality TV that focuses on a case of shamed public sexualization around AIDS. This episode might just be one more ding on the nerves to some people, but here it resonates with other scenes of suffering within the family and among friends, colleagues, and the body politic in a way that makes one ask general questions and questions about generality: about whose lives are made obscenities and whose are valued; which suffering is an effect of the law's sovereign power and which is an effect of habits, norms, open secrets, ideologies, patterns of "accident," and interest; which resistances are valued and which not; and, at the heart of it, what the point is of propping any general case on a singular story, given how diffuse, banal, particular, and seemingly discretionary so much systemic violence is, especially insofar as it is regularly transmitted through passive-aggressive instruments like zoning laws, pedagogy, tone of voice, sidewalk manners, fairy tales, or *stare decisis*.⁶ Thus in this work, it is not only a dominating power that segments life into false antinomies, material and epistemic hierarchies, or holding patterns that become calcified into facts, laws, norms, and negating types of personhood. It is not only the privileged who make up stories that dilute or dreamify the hegemonic agreement, at once distorting and protecting them. The reproduction of power and the work of violence are collective, serving many interests, at once explicit, insinuated, and formal.

On Being the Object of Property also shows how, moving through ordinary life, we often notice only belatedly that we have already begun to collect and organize the diverse scenes that disorganize our affects without knowing how we are holding them, or anything else, like ourselves, together. The gathering together of incidents that become events slowly, only as they resonate with other happenings, is the beginning of altering objects. Noting how institutionally-sedimented force affects the sensorium makes it possible to see objects in a different way—as sites or collections of effects—and therefore to change their meaning, structure, and impact.⁷

6 *Id.* at 18–20. In addition, Williams writes about *stare decisis* in PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS, *THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS: DIARY OF A LAW PROFESSOR* 7, 140 (1991).

7 Seeing objects as clusters of incident in proximity that create a context for the *historical* subject's being in the world is what Michel Foucault meant to teach through the concept of "genealogy." See MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, in *LANGUAGE, COUNTER-MEMORY, PRACTICE: SELECTED ESSAYS BY MICHEL FOUCAULT* 147–48 (Donald F. Bouchard ed., 1977). Bruno Latour advocates a general procedure of revealing

Here, racialized sexual violence and sexualized racial violence are a kind of Mobius strip, a knot, and a weapon whose faux ontology the essay is trying to destroy. But Williams' way of tapping into the episode's capacity to make a situation into a transformative case, her ambition to convert negating encounters into "resources" and "provisions" for better living, collects the knots without connecting the dots into what appears to be a line.⁸ In Williams' essay, and regularly in her work, the disturbance of the encounter with concepts, things, affects, emotions, judgments, norms, laws, classrooms, conferences, shops, and other people generates destabilizing episodes that suspend the effects of relentless negation so that we can look at them and reshape not only what concepts we can derive from them but how we, bodily, sensually, can *occupy* them: see the final Polar Bear anecdote, during which she dons the "cool fragments of white-fur invisibility" previously associated with white supremacy.⁹

But her style of anecdote nested in segments nested in sections demonstrates many other things. It enters into evidence the fact that the same kinds of thing repeatedly happen and that life on the bottom is an extended case of repetitive stress disorder; it suggests that a genuine counter-justice can be sensed affectively, and in minor folds of relationality that have not achieved event status, the way we usually think it; it demonstrates that for social change worthy of its inconvenience to occur we must bring all of the ways we know something to a problem even if, and especially when, and since inevitably, all of those ways are incommensurate, overwhelming, and tedious.

From the medical and legal spaces of reproduction to the ritual zones of the funeral, and all that's in the middle—in hospitals and courtrooms, on street corners and bedrooms, or anywhere the impossible and unbearable exist near the intimacies of attachment and the incoherent rigidities of institutions, where tender contact and tendered contract point to the hovering presence of life and death—something happens in the encounter as she writes it that keeps things open, often painfully open and unresolved, still and always resonating, somehow, and therefore always potentially the beginning of a thought worth drawing out. This must be why, crossing the gutters between episodes, the essay is also a tribute to conversation, that unleashing thing we do which, happening everywhere and anywhere, has no memorial to it except for whatever trace we make to mark its demonstration of jagged

the dynamics of proximity in the construction of the object in his work on *associology*. See Bruno Latour, *How to Write 'The Prince' for Machines as well as for Machinations*, in *TECH. AND SOC. CHANGE* 20–43 (Brian Elliott ed., 1988).

8 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 18.

9 *Id.* at 24.

attachments, uneven attention, and the will to make connections and potentials. In contract, Williams writes, we pretend there is something like an equality of obligation, a consensual real, and a membrane made from adequate representation.¹⁰ In contrast, in the built places of everyday life, extremely awkward scenes of conversation and counterpoint extend relationality and thought into strange spaces, beyond what can be intended, interrupting people's confidence and control, and sometimes in mutuality freeing them from stuckness in the usual contradictions with which, for horrible efficiency's sake, we all move through the world a bit mechanically.

II. Dissociative

About a work as intense and theatrical as this one, it might be odd to claim that *On Being the Object of Property* struggles with exemplarity by dedramatizing narrative into episode, epic into moment, and structure into gestures that convey intensities of need for the world to be a certain way. But this diminishing process—the episode as cooling chamber—is key to the work's aesthetic, political, and ethical ambition to give subordinated bodies in the present a shot at not having the past reproduced in the contemporary nervous system.¹¹ The interruption by aesthetic virtuality, by counter-form, is key to her strategy—not method—here. (It is not a method insofar as it is inimitable, not-prescriptive, and creative.) But the essay is not only affirmative about the process of aggressively remediating the world. For the labor of imagining a way to build a better good life out of the space of converged negativities and tender attachments is terribly costly, affectively. “As if a slaved or owned psyche could ever be reconciled with mental health,”¹² Williams writes with dry, ironic flatness, noting additionally that cohabiting with her knowledges induces “a schizophrenia of biblical dimension . . . with all the baggage that that connotes.”¹³

On Being the Object of Property foregrounds strategies of flourishing without reconciling the splintering imprint of that negativity. The essay is varied, for example, in the way it describes the experience of affective and political non-sovereignty in the face of what feels intractable in the law and other vehicles of social continuity that breed racism, misogyny, and class antagonism: sometimes non-sovereignty floods the body into thrilled excitement

10 *Id.* at 13–16.

11 Michael Taussig describes the nervous system as a scene of reactivity and calcification, of threat and interest, of conscious and unconscious attention that shapes the ongoing state of emergency in the world that passes through humans. See MICHAEL TAUSSIG, *THE NERVOUS SYSTEM* (1991).

12 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 9.

13 *Id.* at 11.

and hypervigilance; sometimes it shatters its solidarity, and it also makes her being go numb. Likewise, in some episodes, as when she's teaching or rhetoricizing, assuming the mien of cutting performative authority is exciting and reparative, but sometimes, often at the same time, it is self-lacerating and self-alienating, as when Williams writes of herself in the third person, which might be a relief, a demonstration of loss, or both. Additionally, in a few segments, legal fictions re-enslave the subject, while in others they extend genuinely preservative and extensive rights way beyond the zones typically reserved for the "deserving."¹⁴ For every episode in which Williams trusts and elaborates spontaneous, intuitive, visceral knowledge, there are episodes where the self-respect for gut feeling by judges, law students, and herself represents the performance of their gross and damaging entitlement, their *déformation professionnelle*.

So this is not work that elevates affect over cognition, a feeling justice over a rational one, or fairy tales over legal fictions. (I believe this would be a standard misreading of Williams' work.) What does it do, then, with all that material? Positively, one might say that it is greedy to use all knowledge and all idioms as resources, even though at any moment the very clarity of any one kind of knowing and experimenting with interrupting a situation may bruise one's capacity to let in another kind of knowing and practice. That is another reason why the episode's exemplarity matters in this work: to mark an impasse, to make a cavity out of which could grow a possible capacity, outcome, and concept, and to make a person or a people available for the next (potentially transformative, if maddening) encounter. Any episode is a potential hub, organizing offerings for potential lines of flight, social relations, affective structures, and skills at paying attention.

Thus, when Williams says "schizophrenia" to relate the maddening effects of ordinary life in a multiply supremacist world, and in her persona as "mad law professor," she is not speaking clinically, closing down affective disruptions into the discipline of the symptom. Instead, she is tendering a challenge to read both the force of the form of a thing and to loosen up its internal structure. Such attention demands the paradox of an analytic poetic that is also a philosophy, a political theory, and the only way to make way for a non-supremacist realism, a realism that grasps this moment in its harshness and insists on a realism-to-come. Asserting that material rhetorically for a world that does not exist yet—this is the point of a politicized aesthetic. To aestheticize does not only involve, then, the protective distancing of a self-confirming pleasure through the defense mechanism of form, but a remediation of the over-close world into displaying form's intricate, live dynamics. Such an acknowledgement of form as pattern of convergence would be central

14 *Id.* at 22–23.

to any analytics that take the encounter with overdetermination seriously.¹⁵

Another way to capture this strategic style's insistence on taking things in without looking for a homogenizing point is to think about how *On Being the Object of Property* mobilizes a dissociative poetic.¹⁶ Dissociation is at least five kinds of thing: an ordinary mode of affective delay in the wake of something's impact; a state of awareness, like that of disbelief, that registers a gap between being affected and whatever comes next; an unconscious process of managing destabilizing intensities by separating them out, so that one does not feel the conflict, say, among one's need, vulnerability, receptivity, and aggression; a condition of dispersed, multiple, and tangled responses, often presenting as muted but just as often appearing in intensified scenes like mania or teaching; and, I will argue, a predictable effect of becoming a subject within the negating pressure of the politicized world, as though a circuit breaker within the overwhelmed sensorium is constantly snapping and repairing.¹⁷

A dissociative poetic involves all of these things, and more, including providing a phenomenological theatre of social negation that veers among feeling states from the numb

15 It's always worth reencountering the concept of overdetermination as most fully introduced in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

It thus seems plausible to suppose that in the dream-work a psychical force is operating which on the one hand strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity, and on the other hand, by means of over-determination, creates from elements of low psychical value new values, which afterwards find their way into the dream-content. If that is so, a *transference and displacement of psychical intensities* occurs in the process of dream-formation

SIGMUND FREUD, *The Interpretation Of Dreams*, in THE STANDARD EDITION OF THE COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKS OF SIGMUND FREUD 307–08 (James Strachey ed., 1953). This psychoanalytic process of re- and de-intensifying affect does more than just induce estrangement from a norm or object that has come to pass as a fact or a truth. Overdetermination as an analytic scene means to induce attention to the ways a vehicle of meaning is also a defense against encountering the many pressures that bring it into existence in one seemingly solid effect. This comprehension of the dream/symbol/object was then adapted significantly into political theory by way of Louis Althusser's revision of structural determination and the reality of the appearance in *Contradiction and Overdetermination*, in LOUIS ALTHUSSER, *Contradiction and Overdetermination*, in FOR MARX 87, 87–126 (Ben Brewster trans., 1969).

16 What follows elaborates material from my forthcoming book, *On The Inconvenience Of Other People*.

17 The dissociation bibliography is vast. As an introduction, see DISSOCIATION AND THE DISSOCIATIVE DISORDERS DSM-V AND BEYOND (Paul F. Dell & John A. O'Neil eds., 2009) and JOHN STEINER, PSYCHIC RETREATS: PATHOLOGICAL ORGANIZATIONS IN PSYCHOTIC, NEUROTIC AND BORDERLINE PATIENTS (1993).

to the acute.¹⁸ It is not a mimetic representation of biopolitics as the mad world sketched on the walls of the cave inside, but an affective style of holding and processing and making room to move amid that which appears to be stuck in a structure. But to call dissociation a mere counter-structure of discontinuity or alienation would be to under-assess the coherence of its profoundly social and historical character and to miss its utility in staying bound to life. *On Being the Object of Property* locates the possibility of being otherwise to the normative world in the dissociated states that allow for incommensurable knowledges and attachments. In following out those episodes it proposes how one might better show up even for the relations that one also finds unbearable *because* one must bear them.

Williams is not singularly “mad” in this style of engagement. For one thing, she argues, the law’s own relation to obligation may not be “illusory” but is “delusional” in its distribution of legitimacy only to *some* commands for reciprocal obligation while ignoring others, as though wearing “horseblinders to focus attention simultaneously toward and away from.”¹⁹ And then there are the countless incidents in everyday life, where proximity produces toxic exchanges under the guise of rationality (contract, teaching) that make fairy tale resolutions to fundamental antagonisms. The madness of the law, as Derrida put it, is also the madness of genre and of sexual difference, in that all of these structures claim to smooth out the transduction of what can never be homogenized.²⁰ This is high drama, but it is also the ordinary teeming with all the forgettable private moments that nonetheless never completely fade.

For their brilliant and meticulous attention to detailing the diverse sensorial consequences of the world’s negative impact, *On Being the Object of Property* and *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* ought to occupy key positions in the annals of the phenomenology of what Adorno calls “damaged life,” whose theorists are not exactly a tradition, and whose effects are not exactly an inheritance that one can simply claim.²¹ This library-to-come is constituted by those whose resistant theoretical engagement with the reproduction of structure would be linked to an existential and political crisis of self-habitation from which

18 In the longer discussion of dissociative poetics, works by Stephen Burt, Tony Hoagland, and George Simmel have a more explicit impact than they have here, although they inform my analysis generally. See Tony Hoagland, *Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment*, POETRY MAG., Mar. 21, 2006, at 508; Stephen Burt, *The New Thing*, THE BOSTON REV. May/June 2009, at 41; Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis And Mental Life* (1903), reprinted in GEORG SIMMEL ON INDIVIDUALITY AND SOCIAL FORMS 339 (Donald N. Levine ed., 1971).

19 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 10.

20 Jacques Derrida, *The Law of Genre*, 7 CRITICAL INQUIRY 55 (Avital Ronell trans., 1980).

21 THEODOR W. ADORNO, MINIMA MORALIA 67–68 (E.F.N. Jephcott trans., NLB 1974) (1951).

the subordinated subject receives little vacation. Its exemplary theorists, Adorno, Du Bois, and Fanon, for example, are distinguished by their insistence on expressing racialized structural subordination by way of its disturbing sensual, psychic, and physical effects.²² Race, capital, and family interact with the law and nationality to produce a scenic tableau of bodily existence as an ordinary crisis that constitutes the very place from which the theorist launches his generalizations.

Many political commitments and contexts of anticolonial, antiracist struggle link Williams to her brethren as well—not so much a common interest in feminist politics, though. For that we would turn to the tradition from Audre Lorde to Sara Ahmed.²³ Three shared patterns interest me here: their common urge to demonstrate that violence has a transgenerational, translocal, and affective impact that expresses itself in the historically subordinated subject through a sensorium dissociated in the ways I've described—overwhelmed, chaotic, dispersed, and organized into heuristic modes of defense; and, paradoxically, their interest in the radically restorative impact a dissociated style can have on the nervous system, insofar as dissociation signifies not only the piercing effects of many forces but multiple kinds of creative defense against resignation to the bad world.

Third, for these thinkers, the intimate non-sovereignty of the conversation genre, with its gentle, fierce, and solidaristic modes of interruption and extension, frequently appears as a transformative, witnessing vehicle, for ill and good.²⁴ Conversation is both an ordinary way that power extends its mimetic ambitions for subjects taking shape in it—wanting the dominated subject not to be surprising, wanting the privileged subject to be able to idealize

22 See, e.g., W.E.B. DU BOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* (1903); FRANTZ FANON, *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS* (Charles Lam Markmann trans., Pluto Press 1986) (1952) [hereinafter FANON, *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS*].

23 Feminism and Queer Theory's contribution to the political theory of damaged life has barely been assessed in relation to the twentieth and twenty-first century genealogy that addresses embodied political subjectivity which, when it isn't universalizing, theorizes generality almost entirely from the perspectives of racialized men. That sentence and this essay points to a lot of unfinished—unstarted—business. In addition to *THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS: DIARY OF A LAW PROFESSOR*, *supra* note 6, significant events in this other archive include: AUDRE LORDE, *SISTER OUTSIDER* (1984); GLORIA ANZALDUA, *THE GLORIA ANZALDUA READER* (2009); LUCE IRIGARAY, *SPECULUM OF THE OTHER WOMAN* (1985); SARA AHMED, *QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY* (2006); CATHERINE MALABOU, *CHANGING DIFFERENCE* (2011); BONNIE HONIG, *ANTIGONE, INTERRUPTED* (2013). For further background, please see the works of Angela Davis, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Eve K. Sedgwick.

24 In the present essay I focus on Fanon, but Du Bois's work both discusses and performs conversation as a revelatory and pedagogical tool in the life of U.S. racism and Adorno's work contains an extensive polemic about the blockages to genuine conversation in modernity after Hegel. But it also explains the experiment of its own aphoristic writing as an effect of being only one half of a conversation (with Max Horkheimer) barred by crises in the historical present. ADORNO, *supra* note 21, at 5, 13–16, 41–42, 70, 137, 183.

the version of himself that he encounters. But in a conversation anything can happen too: it's always a scene of non-sovereign relation, and therefore one in which supremacy's process can be anarchically, experimentally, or accidentally exploded.

Fanon's *The Fact of Blackness* comes closest to providing a formally aesthetic precedent for Williams' style of thinking.²⁵ But her work goes further than Fanon's in its disidentification with philosophically normative frames. To begin with, there are so many resonances between them: take, for example, "the cold game of equality-staring" that *On Being the Object of Property* proposes as an ordinary event of racial shaming, aversion, aggression, and testing that rarely makes it to the status of event while maintaining a thudding impact in the consciousness of "black (or brown or red)" people.²⁶ Foregrounding also the drama of composure and discomposure that haunts the sensorium of the dominated subject every day of her life, she shows how the thing that looks like shyness or defeat might also or instead be a refusal of the dominator's demand to provide or control the conditions of recognition ("she didn't like white people seeing inside her"²⁷). A dissociating performance might be a symptom, a statement, or an appearance not yet drawn to a meaning; having curiosity about it is here an ethics and a politics.

Lewis Gordon, the philosopher and historian of black existential thought, argues that the scene of Black equality-staring is at the phenomenological core of epistemological colonialism in the world of Fanonian existentialism as well.²⁸ For Fanon, being a racialized object of symbolic property demonstrates that in Anglo-supremacist culture there is no black ontology, no freedom not to be an effect of a cause, and therefore no phenomenological confidence either:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is

25 FRANTZ FANON, *The Fact of Blackness*, in *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS*, *supra* note at 22, at 82–108 [hereinafter FANON, *The Fact of Blackness*].

26 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 8, 12.

27 *Id.* at 11.

28 Lewis R. Gordon, *African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason*, in *NOT ONLY THE MASTER'S TOOLS: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE* 3–50 (Lewis R. Gordon & Jane Anna Gordon eds., 2006); Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility*, in *EXISTENCE IN BLACK: AN ANTHOLOGY OF BLACK EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY* 69 (Lewis R. Gordon ed., 1997).

solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty . . . ²⁹

Repeatedly in the essay, his social flesh opened to history, Fanon feels forced into a “historico-racial schema” or “racial epidermal schema” that makes him “explode” or dissociate, to become what he calls a “triple person” in the “third-person” whose febrile coordinates “dislocate” his consciousness and distribute his responsibility to others across stereotype, history, and the judgment of the present.³⁰ Everywhere he goes he is a potential event of exemplification, a figuration of a blackness lived simultaneously as a saturation and a splintering: everywhere he is vulnerable to becoming exemplified as the object of property by being the subject of commentary. Supremacist commentary is funny that way: turning its subject at once into boulders and dust.

If the encounter is one place where subordinating structures are inculcated as subjectivity, the one-sided or overheard conversation is the medium through which this is most harshly experienced: in *The Fact of Blackness*, Fanon cites exchange after exchange in which he is ranked, evaluated, exceptionalized, made exemplary, made cartoon, and made pitilessly real.

“Understand, my dear boy, color prejudice is something I find utterly foreign. . . . But of course, come in, sir, there is no color prejudice among us. . . . Quite, the Negro is a man like ourselves. . . . It is not because he is black that he is less intelligent than we are. . . . I had a Senegalese buddy in the army who was really clever. . . .”

Where am I to be classified? Or, if you prefer, tucked away?

“A Martinican, a native of ‘our’ old colonies.”

Where shall I hide?

“Look at the nigger! . . . Mama, a Negro! . . . Hell, he’s getting mad. . . . Take no notice, sir, he does not know that you are as civilized as we . . .”³¹

29 FANON, *The Fact of Blackness*, *supra* note 25, at 83.

30 *Id.* at 84.

31 *Id.* at 85.

Occasionally, in response, he jousts: “Kiss the handsome Negro’s ass, madame!” But, usually, being the object of commentary (a form of property as knowledge, not capital) sends him into the deep silences—“Where shall I hide?”³² he asks, amidst the noise of his becoming overmeaningful and therefore inhuman to others. It is as though the essay itself is the withheld material of riposte that would otherwise have sanctioned the appearance of discursive equality suggested by banter, the verbal shot-reverse-shot. But racialization in real-time relations is no screwball comedy. “I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object,” he writes.³³ To be an object is to be relieved of the contingencies of living. Shattered by being particularized and burdened by what Williams calls “the fragmenting and fragmented”³⁴ supremacist view, his only capacity to imagine “a unified social vision”³⁵ is to move to the universal, which amounts to being “a man, nothing but a man.”³⁶

About *The Fact of Blackness*, Ghassan Hage has written that Fanon is stuck in the dominant logic of Enlightenment racialization by rebelling against both particularity and universality.³⁷ If the particular over-embeds the subject in the materials of a toxic history, fixing him in a prison of generalization, the universal idealizes the man without qualities, who deserves justice and recognition only insofar as history becomes neutralized, trivialized. In this modernist view of the universal, the body is an anchor in the bad sense, a scene of reduction. But in Hage’s view, freedom should not be thought to be located in the absence of categorization—taxonomies are inevitable. Fanon’s inability to release himself from the dialectic of universality and particularity is movement without freedom, an entirely negative agency.

Fanon’s essay closes, you may remember, with such a rapid oscillation:

I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit. I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple. Yesterday,

32 *Id.*

33 *Id.*

34 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 10.

35 *Id.*

36 FANON, *The Fact of Blackness*, *supra* note 25, at 85.

37 Ghassan Hage, *The Affective Politics of Racial Mis-Interpellation*, 27 THEORY, CULTURE & SOC’Y 112, 112–29 (2010).

awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.³⁸

It would take hours or a lifetime to unpack everything that's going on here. Centuries and also the present of white colonial supremacy make Fanon's body incapable of controlling its abreaction: his weeping is sadness, melodrama, the exhaustion of an organism's strength and defense, a giving out, and also something less defeated, an expansive pronouncement on this affective fact of blackness, which makes a sensorium that can only see the world's natural flourishing turning back on itself, failed, the Hegelian Owl of history now silent and paralyzed. This multiplication and intercalation of strengths and weaknesses, victories and losses, events and incidents, is what happens to a being trapped in the dialectic of objectification who thinks that his only choices involve selecting what kind of object to be.

But if one sees objects not as objective, but as conversion and convergence points of anachronistic, irreducibly different, and always multiplying forces of projection and production, one does not need to induce the drama of antinomy that makes distinctions into mortal enemies. Everything in quotation marks in *The Fact of Blackness* is in a conversation that, sticking to him, imprisons him in an action without agency. In *On Being the Object of Property*, a similar phenomenological problem of affective dissociation has quite a different outcome.

There are moments in my life when I feel as though a part of me is missing. There are days when I feel so invisible that I can't remember what day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can't remember my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to the people who love me best. Those are the times when I catch sight of my reflection in store windows and am surprised to see a whole person looking back. Those are the times when my skin becomes gummy as clay and my nose slides around on my face and my eyes drip down to my chin. I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal picture that is smooth and whole; when all else fails, I reach for a mirror and stare myself down until the features reassemble themselves like lost sheep.³⁹

38 FANON, *The Fact of Blackness*, *supra* note 25, at 108.

39 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 17.

From one perspective, what's brilliant about this writing is that its parataxis, its style of cataloguing bodily events, does not add up to one representation that would exemplify her body as a kind of symptom, fetish, or thing. Nor does time progress, accrete, or develop: episodes cluster "at that time," the time of the incident, the encounter, the opening into the retellings as actions that induce the shape of a potential event. It does not matter *when* she discovers, exactly, again and again, that she is dissociated, that her sensorium and her body are moving in proximity but not in sync or identity. Her knowledge of the overwhelmed state is constant yet uneven, punctuated yet random, and indeed it's the inconstancy of the relation of the mood to the body, the belated sensorium to the overpresent image, consciousness to movement, that is demonstrated in this and every episode. Surprised to be whole when she feels a mess; shocked that she has failed to sustain a coherent "bodily schema" despite constantly enduring disruptive episodes; discovering that there is no such thing as a fixed composure but only a variety of slidings—this is what happens when her fantasy of an infinite, imperturbable way of being flees the scene.

When she loses the very infrastructure with which she moves through the world as an entitled being, she is surprised when she cannot show up for the people she loves or for life or for her own bodily ego. To be dissociated persistently is always both to be knowing and surprised, always to discover belatedly the ways in which the parts of oneself are loosely conversant. Fanon is always surprised as well, at the particular structure of his hell: but there are only two walls in his hell, and bruising. In contrast, Williams does not shuttle *between* the whole and the fragmented, the universal and the particular: she is not seeking refuge in a genre for the encounter, but, in witnessing what happens, always interrupts the very continuity of adhesion that a supremacist world markets as the real. Interrupting the idiom of the encounter by putting it next to another situation, she tracks the resonance that shifts the ground underneath what's stuck or structural. In the final line of this paragraph she mobilizes the gaze of privilege to organize herself emotionally. The torture of white equality-gazing saturated the page only a few sections prior; now, here, figuring her features as lost sheep herded into a relation by what is structurally that same gaze is not melodrama or even violence. She's converted it into a resource for better-than-survival.

III. Pedagogical

For Fanon, practicing an extreme phenomenology is a compulsion and a commitment. On one side, he identifies the "affective ankylosis" of white subjectivity, exemplifying the visceral calcification of racism in the privileged by way of a skeletal illness, ankylosis, in which the body's joints are stiff and unmovable. On the other side, he sees everywhere an African "erethism," a state in which the Black nervous system is poisoned and experiences

unbearable sensitivity.⁴⁰ So one might say that if Fanon is trying to forge an alternative universal in *The Fact of Blackness*, it is embodied in a racialized sensorium that pervades all individuals, not just the dominated, and is characterized by its reduction to a single quality. He describes this state of unrelieved overstimulation by racialization as like being fixed in solution, “in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by dye.”⁴¹

Fanon tends to see any inherited knowledge as an obstacle to thriving, insofar as the racialized subject receives himself violently and chaotically capturing “catchphrases strewn over the surface of things.”⁴² This view resonates with what Williams calls the inheritance of a disinheritance constitutive of African American kinship in its proximity to sexuality and American dreamings.⁴³ She shares, on occasion, his desire to escape, to become invisible, a non-event. But Williams’ scavenging epistemology has a different idea of a solution: not as that which fixes a thing, but as that which disperses or dissolves an object. Hers is a pedagogical strategy for making new forms of life from within life and sees convention not as a tombstone or wall but a resource for taking the kind of thing one is said to be and the kinds of things one knows all too well and converting them into pieces that can be thrown together into new rituals of encounter and exchange, ritual being the strange practice she and her people invent to slow down response time, and to diminish and convert desperation into new structures emerging from experience. She tells a story, for example, about being a neighbor in a bartering community who has nothing with which to barter: but it turns out that showing up for the social counts, transforming uselessness into an intangible good and “goods” into “provisions.”⁴⁴

Peter Fonagy and others argue that the historically subordinated subject inherits many kinds of negativity.⁴⁵ History lingers in the present in registers that cannot be remembered, as they are tethered to past situations and events, and other people’s blockages. Disturbances telescoped decades and half centuries ago reappear in bodily habits, styles of

40 FANON, *The Fact of Blackness*, *supra* note 25, at 92; erethism is discussed in the previous chapter of FANON, *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS*, *supra* note 22, at 42.

41 *Id.* at 82.

42 *Id.* at 87.

43 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 6–7.

44 *Id.* at 18.

45 See Peter Fonagy, *The Transgenerational Transmission of Holocaust Trauma*, 1 ATTACHMENT & HUM. DEV. 92 (1999); see also HAYDÉE FAIMBERG, *THE TELESCOPING OF GENERATIONS: LISTENING TO THE NARCISSISTIC LINKS BETWEEN GENERATIONS* (2005).

affective disattunement, passed down through the atmospheres of a natal pedagogy, bodily exchanges, and affective swaps; and the subject appears not as a being in the present but as an anachronism. The history of living with negativity produces so many adaptations and failures that Fonagy, working with the children and grandchildren of Holocaust victims, sees repeatedly the embodied descendent of a traumatic situation expressing an affective out-of-jointness that appears both as a nightmare and an enigma. We are all anachronisms, all structurally dissociated subjects of history; the subject of historical subordination has less capacity to disavow that, though, and feels the past as an ongoing force in the visceral present in a way that confuses the direction of action, the confidence about where call and response is addressed, and the capacity to throw things off for good, in case they'd be useful tools or weapons, and because more loss might be unbearable.

This condition of exemplary negativity obtains whether the space of disturbance is a traumatic event or crisis ordinariness, through the structural practices of a nation, a racial, sexual, or discourse formation, a family, beloveds, a set of laws, a medium, or the atmospheres of norms. (Often, of course, it's a mix of these.) Williams senses this too and contrives here an aim to build the aesthetic, affective, institutional, and political infrastructure able to bear what seems unfathomable in them, but not by resolving the embodied data into a literal-minded plane of consistency or empty hegemony. This is why we began with anecdote, episode, and conversation: the sociality of the world, its hiccups and inconstancies, are maddening and make room to move. Just as no heroes can change the world alone, so too none of the episodes her essay wields suffices in itself to generate a concept of how to live. Indeed, in every instance the becoming-theory or abstraction of a singular relation portends a bad moment in a bad day, insofar as the theoretical plane cannot repair what it has also contributed to producing. Her work thus accrues what we might call a *suspensive* genre, in which a disturbing encounter leads not to resolution in an object or inversion as escape, but querying and multiplying approaches to a problem of multiple lines of descent and fields of encounter in the present from which new scenes can be formed confidently without that confidence leading to a fetish.

This is another way to talk about what conversation, collaboration, and engagement can do, to hold up the world as unfinished project. A great example of the power in this conceptualizing style resides in the essay's final paragraph, to which I have already referred, where she encounters the white male students on the never big enough Dartmouth sidewalk:

I put distance between them and me, gave myself over to polar bear musings. I allowed myself to be watched over by bear spirits. Clean white

wind and strong bear smells. The shadowed amnesia; the absence of being; the presence of polar bears. White wilderness of icy meat-eaters heavy with remembrance; leaden with undoing; shaggy with the effort of hunting for silence; frozen in a web of intention and intuition. A lunacy of polar bears. A history of polar bears. A pride of polar bears. A consistency of polar bears. In those meandering pastel polar bear moments, I found cool fragments of white-fur invisibility. Solid, black-gummed, intent, observant. Hungry and patient, impassive and exquisitely timed. The brilliant bursts of exclusive territoriality. A complexity of messages implied in our being.⁴⁶

Like a dream, this paragraph displaces and condenses all of the things the essay has proposed about polar bear facticity, as an idiom of history, rights, beauty, maternity, and the knots of aggression and care. This cluster reminds us how Patricia Williams forces the archive of damaged life to include genealogies of woman-of-color feminism and queer theory by valorizing writing as a craft pedagogy that counters the aseptic aspirations of professionalism and the disciplines. From within those converging projects she mixes up the theoretical voice with the observational as they are already in contact and because nothing will change if some kinds of knowledge are protected from disturbance by the impact of the world.

Such is an ethics of interruption, seriality, saying all the propositions and demands in all of the registers in which they reach toward and fail their object, and intimate storytelling. The writing resolves nothing but threatens our own reductive desires, desires for efficiency and property in knowledge, our aversion to acknowledging too much of what we know: it disturbs the promise of the sign to solve the problem of living, which is a strategy of ankylotic thinking, after all, with its aim to keep the encounter and the conversation from ever really moving.

46 Williams, *supra* note 1, at 24.