

How to Let Go?

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Like so many of us, I began thinking deeply about “race” through and with the texts and lectures of Stuart Hall. “Race, The Floating Signifier” remains one of the most interesting and important lectures on the persistence of this classificatory system we call “race.” As I moved far afield from Hall’s British sociological Marxism, I have always gravitated back to his texts for two broad conceptual movements: a rich account of ideology that is not reducible to any clearly delineated Marxist structures and a capacious rendering of “black” to refer to non-white groups, persons, populations. While these both may be true of other scholars, particularly Brits, the recurrence in Hall’s texts crystallizes a question I want to pursue in this meeting: how might the discourse of race & racism obfuscate the material realities of anti-blackness? And how, in so obfuscating, might it function ideologically to perpetuate that material violence, which it claims to describe, conceptualize and even ameliorate?

1988 & 1415

Our common essay from Hall, “The Meaning of New Times,” was published in 1988. Almost a decade into the Thatcher-Reagan Era, the essay offers a helpful snapshot of this moment in the theoretical and political struggle to find footing amidst “the postmodern condition.” Of course, Hall pursues the Marxian paths of Jameson, Eagleton and, in a notably out-of-synch move, Gramsci. In so doing, he dwells on two observations that I want to link. First, he notes the differing temporalities of political, economic, sociological, and cultural times; ranging from the “fast” temporality of politics (“a week is a long time in politics,” 258) to the “even slower, more glacial” time of culture (258), Hall invites us to pry open a space-time of critique (and perhaps also creativity) through a careful phenomenological attentiveness to these differing temporalities. Second, Hall voices a striking optimism about “the democratisation of culture” (260). He describes this as “transforming rhythms and forces of modern *material* life” (sic.); “the diversification of social worlds;” and “the ‘pluralisation’ of social life [that] expands the positionalities and identities available to ordinary people (at least in the industrial world) in their everyday working, social, familial, and sexual lives” (260-61). While I have and will continue to argue, along with so many others, that the aestheticizing of social life feeds the pernicious “Diversity Machine” that undermines the possibility of ethics in these neoliberal times, I want to follow Hall’s comments down a different path, the one Fred Moten so exquisitely offers.

To do so, I first bring forth another voice from 1988: *Straight Outta Compton* by N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitudes). Hailed as one of the most influential hip-hop albums of all time, the confrontational sonic style matched the lyrical anger of gangster black masculinity to push rap music directly into mainstream popularity. For example, both [“Straight Outta Compton”](#) and [“Fuck Tha Police”](#) stage confrontations with cops and judges to show how the stereotypes of

black men as drug-addicted violent gangsters fuel their mass incarceration in the U.S. While there is much to say about this album and its appearance in the United States in 1988, I invoke it here to bring the clear voice of black male anger directly into contact with Stuart Hall's hopeful nod towards the pluralizing of social life and democratizing of culture. How can we hear both of these voices at the same time? What kind of dissonant crash must we undergo to hold these two voices in equal force?

I suggest we pry open the multiple temporalities at play. While the hyper-speed of these techno-infused neoliberal times kinetically telescope so, so many of us into exquisite nodes of stimulation that we call "pleasure" and seek to repeat infinitely, I recall the torturous prose of Sylvia Wynter from the TC Meeting of 2017. Invigorating to some and annoying to others, her prose stops her readers in our tracks, for better and for worse. For me, it functions somewhat like the tortured syntax of Lacan, who is also toying with his readers to produce the effects of his arguments in real-time reading acts; so, too, does Wynter's prose jam us up in its endless twists and turns, disarming the long, unconscious habits and presumed chronological and epistemological orbits of our reading practices. Don't worry, I won't force you to undergo an actual quotation. I merely invoke her signature figures, Man1 and Man2, in order to open a far longer temporality: the social life of transatlantic colonialism and its slave trade that we now mark with the date of 1415.

With the ludicrous move that only an academic would venture, I suggest that we—especially we white Europeans and European-descendants—need the heft of those long, systemically violent six centuries to animate the sonics of N.W.A. with sufficient force to meet the deafening roar of the Diversity Machine. And only in that clash might we—again, especially we white Europeans and European-descendants—find our ways, without letting go of the violent anti-blackness of those long six centuries, towards Stuart Hall's non-cynical, even optimistic glimpse of a material expansion of cultural expressions and social lives.

The Xenogenerosity of Moten's Blur

In the selections from Fred Moten's *Black and Blur*, we hear the clarion trumpeting of this violent anti-blackness in Stokely Carmichael's 1967 speech at Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington, US. The quintessential "race man," Carmichael is infamous in the pantheon of Black Power activists from the 1960s and 70s as holding (along with Huey Newton and LeRoi Jones) the most strident views of anti-black racism. Not exactly what we would call "intersectional," Carmichael is infamous for his relegation of black women in the movement to secretaries, preferably in short skirts fetching coffee: he is, in other words, sexist. As race men always are. But his position on anti-black racism purifies the problem, extracting it from all other social forces (something like an eidetic reduction). It is this purity (which we find reiterated these days in the self-acclaimed "Afropessimist" work of Frank Wilderson, David Marriott, and Jared Sexton) that I find irresistible. As Moten excerpts Carmichael telling kids

in high school in Seattle, Washington in 1967, if white America ever condemns itself “for the acts of brutality and bestiality that she’s heaped upon . . . black people, . . . she would have to commit suicide.” (249). I agree with Carmichael that the clearest ethical response to the long six centuries of violent, systemic anti-blackness is suicide—the suicide of the white race.

But Fred Moten blurs all that.

First and immediately, he blurs it as a possible response, drawing this intolerable self-condemnation into relation with its necessary twin, self-determination. Initially, Moten traces this as the well-trodden path of European philosophy confronting its own horrors, exemplified by Levinas and Sartre (250-52). This explicitly European detour from the otherwise United States scene is striking and leaves intellectual and psychic space to continue to ponder the im/possibility of self-condemnation in the U.S., even if always in the shadow of the compulsively repeated “interest of constant and obsessively absorptive and expansive self-reflection” (251). In other words, I remain persuaded by the purity of the white suicide argument and want to continue to explore it, despite its obvious and dangerous narcissism.¹

More generally (and yet also only through specific works of art), Moten blurs the clarion call for self-condemnation and suicide in a spirit of “xenogenerosity” (266). He brings this “blurring” out of works of art² as scenes that refuse the collapse back into self-condemnation/self-determination. They refuse the collapse back into the metaphysics of identities, separation, individuals, and all their agential fantasies. This blurring beckons us, Moten’s readers, into spacings that open onto affects more expansive than guilt/innocence (or free/unfree or power/oppressed or sovereign/slave or...or...) or the endless dyads of classical liberalism’s sentimentality and willfulness. He invites us to consider whether our conceptual habits already fix the possibilities of relation in the limited terms of sovereignty (256) or “condemns marginality to complicity with power” (257). Through glimpses that I gather best in the meditative act of reading itself, Moten beckons into this blurring that might be “art’s insovereign social work” (256). He carves spaces beyond the analytics of critique and towards the creativity “to make an alternative practice, not form an alternative identity” (261).

But it is very, very blurry in there. And I worry intensely about how I am reading the book—and sometimes about whether I should be reading it at all. There are moments (such as footnote 2, 250) when readers are clearly positioned as black and others when we are everyone (such as, “What if the theater of refusal were ours, for us, whoever and whatever we are?” (257)). But how to enter that theater of refusal as refuge as a Euro-descended colonizing sovereign subject? Can some differentiating, disorienting, decentering act like queer living

¹ Saidiya Hartman’s work on John Rankine in *Scenes of Subjection* also comes to mind.

² See 267 for his account of criticism as sometimes “making the work get to work, encouraging it to do the work of its own undoing.”

enable this entrance, as Moten's work on Hacker's poetry inside Delany's autobiography suggests? (And as his mourning of José recurrently invokes?) Or, more bleakly and problematically politically,³ might the incipient tyrannies of global fascisms push more and more of us into this refuge—in the name of being refused? How to enter as one whose deepest habits are to continue the paths that benefit ourselves, however capaciously conceived—that is, to colonize?

In the final paragraphs, Moten returns yet again to José (Muñoz), with whom he chats and visits across the book. He describes a late essay by José like this:

At stake here is a queer phenomenology of perception, a late phenomenology of the feel, one slow enough to be able clearly to see the misty air, the mystery, to sense the blur, and not some normative individuation, as the field from which differences spring. (268)

Perhaps it is through slowing past the slowest possible speed of western cultures that we Euro-descendants can finally feel the weight of these long six centuries since 1415. Such slowed, warped time will surely not be recognizable or knowable. Nor will it be a space in which we can “do” anything. And that, in itself, will be a difference that, perhaps, “unmake[s] the world [as] the earth comes continually into view” (269).

³ “. . . since we might have to open ourselves up to the possibility that political power is not at all what we need.” (257)