Social Death as a Kind of Deconstruction:  
The Figure of the Slave Under Erasure

What is social death to deconstruction? What is the figure of the slave at the intersection of social death and deconstruction? And how do both methods, crossed in this figure, enact a critical form of decolonial thinking?

I.
These are not questions we are accustomed to asking in the wake of Jacques Derrida’s work, nor is it the expected avenue to travel through Orlando Patterson’s conception of social death and slavery. To be clear, though, this is not a question of influence, but of comparative work in search of unexpected points of contact. When framed in terms of decolonial thinking, I want to argue, the intersection of social death and deconstruction underscores a crisis at the heart of “Western” thinking. Undone by absence, undone by what it installs as a cornerstone of legitimation and characterization, the invocation of the figure of the slave dis-assembles so many key moments in Western philosophy after the slave trade. The slave trade changed everything about the structure of the world. Philosophy in the Western tradition is no exception. The slave trade and colonialism were total projects, leaving no aspect of the thought, politics, and culture of the colonizer untouched. How is this the case, and what does it mean?

The reflections that follow respond to the philosophical dimensions of this question. We can begin with a general cluster of claims. Deconstruction is a theorization of death. Thought in terms of supplementarity, the key deconstructive argument in Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* situates what lies exterior to the economy of life, as well as death-as-a-variant-of-life, as the condition for the possibility of meaning, language, and all those constitutive parts of what we conventionally call life and death. Social death, on Patterson’s account, is also something quite different than the binary life-death would suggest. Social death lives inside life and death as an enigma that makes non-enigmatic atrocities possible: the system of slavery, capitalism, coercive social identity, and all those constituent parts of what we conventionally call life and death. We can already discern at least the possibility of a resonance between Derrida’s and Patterson’s work here, a resonance in which the sound of the concept, so to speak, reverberates in complementary ways precisely because both theoretical interventions operate in the atmosphere of an unnameable death. Not a death that concludes a causal chain, not a death that is merely a variation on a conception of life. Rather, the atmospheric in which social death and deconstruction cross is constituted by the commitment to absence (genocidal violence, abjection, erasure, the negative sublime) that generates both the possibility and impossibility of thinking in the Western tradition since the sixteenth century. With Patterson, we document this atmosphere sociologically. With Derrida, we document this
atmosphere theoretically. The figure of the slave embodies, both textually and inside a phenomenology of reading and meaning-making, a sense of supplementarity that is marked as social death and absence, but a social death and absence that makes a certain economy of life possible. At the intersection of social death and deconstruction, then, there is the figure of the slave. Another historical iteration of that certain phrase: il y a là cendre... 3

It is no small thing to then propose, alongside this, the thought of decoloniality. A note on this broader concern. What more can be said about decolonization? Has much at all been said about decolonization? As is the fate of so many conceptual and political innovations in critical theory – or just philosophy and philosophical thinking broadly – what emerged initially as a movement of the people against colonial exploitation and violence (the waves of independence at mid-century and their aftermath), then a project of postcolonial culture-making and statecraft, became a broadly academic, theoretical project of the most urgent order. Where does this take us? Decolonial thinking is a project proposed to undermine and disassemble what had come before it, then, in the wake of that disassembly, generate a new ethics for making cultural, political, and intellectual life in a genuinely postcolonial register and inside, perhaps in the service of, a transformed set of institutions, institutional practices, and collective values. If the slave trade and colonialism were total projects, leaving no aspect of the enslaver/colonial world untouched, then the work of decoloniality is not a siege from the outside, but an insurgency inside the system. A kind of deconstruction, anchored in the persistent presence of social death, that in the figure of the slave, when named at the root of the generation of concepts, draws out the colonial supplement in Western philosophy’s self-articulation. A decolonial act. One small intervention to unsettle and decenter centuries of sedimented colonial meaning and habit.

That is a lot to demand and a very broad set of claims. To this end, I will discuss three examples here: Hegel’s Africa, Kant’s islander, and Locke’s native. From these examples, we catch sight of foundational features of the Western tradition rooted in (putatively) secular reason: the meaning of history, whence duty, and how property and propriety function as the cornerstone of the right to life and to place. I will draw suggestive, broad conclusions, to be sure, and for reasons of space I can give only very cursory treatments. And yet, this is precisely what is asked of us if we are to answer to history’s moral demand, the demand of the historical ghost haunting those corpses piled at the feet of the angel of history who gaze at us with vulnerability, silence, and a Levinasian sense of the ethical. The figure of the slave is a figure, a supplement in an argument about history, ethics, and selfhood. But every figure is an indicator. The figure of the slave? That figure bears within it the history of atrocity and builds that history into some of the most important foundations of thought. How can we think about this as a decolonial gesture and effort? What obligations direct those gestures and efforts?

We must raise the question of race and philosophy.
Now, it bears noting that no small bit of ink has been spilled over the past two and a half decades on the place of race in the European philosophical canon. That scholarship has largely been focused on the emergence of concepts of race, debates about the origins of racial difference, and the place of that difference in imaginations of history, ontology, and morality. One remarkable feature of that research has been how deeply it embeds racial discourse in what had previously been imagined to be a culturally and political neutral set of fields: ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of history, and aesthetics. And yet another curiosity, if we are honest, is how few the pages on that discourse number in comparison to the canonical texts from the same thinker. We nevertheless see in those pages and their link to wider philosophical questions how racism, colonialism, conquest, and the slave trade were part of the total project of philosophy. It was important for Locke, Kant, and Hegel to say something about everything. And there were, perhaps still are, few matters of more pressing and impactful concern than the economy of race and social-historical value.

The work on “philosophy of race” that operates in this frame and register has changed the way we read philosophy and theory since the modern period. Without a doubt. That change shifts our understanding of modernity – which had real range inside the European tradition, moving through the celebration of secularization, the rise of deliberative reason, and the pessimistic elaboration of the same for the purposes of eliminationist antisemitism – and, with that shift, has reminded us of the place of racial thinking in the formation of modern consciousness and conscience. But that work has also labored within an economy of reading for presence, even in the form of traces, which allow us as readers to see the trace of racial thinking in an ethics, the fragmented presence of epistemology in theories of racial descent, or political notions of freedom in the links between race, propriety, and natural servitude. A certain kind of thinking of presence.

What I want to do here, though, is to think the enslaved work of the racial other under erasure, to think from absences and discern, in what is not said and is not wanting-to-be-said, a certain kind of dit and dire of that other as a radical absence that makes the presence of the European tradition possible. While I will work toward, then from, three specific and canonical examples, my broader aim is to provide a framework for thinking the subaltern inside the example with the suggestion of its deconstructive force. What is that deconstructive force and what does it help us see, then think, about the Western tradition?

The key pre-text of this consideration is Derrida’s work on the supplement in his early work, most particularly in Of Grammatology. It is a simple insight, really: the supplement is named as a structural non-component, a part of the structure of a systematic investigation – the origin of language, the meaning of the sign, the very idea of a concept – that does not appear in that systematic account but nevertheless makes the structure (and its other) possible. A transcendental consideration, one that places as the condition for the
possibility of an origin story, a sign-sense relation, or concept, the supplement that never appears in the play of presence and absence dismantles and destabilizes what wants to be stable and secure. The supplement as transcendental is a condition that withdraws at the moment its place as a contingency structuring the system is caught sight of, and then survives in the system as a trace or figure under erasure. It is worth quoting at length, where Derrida writes:

The supplement transgresses and at the same time respects the interdict. This is what also permits writing as the supplement of speech; but already also the spoken word as writing in general. Its economy exposes and protects us at the same time according to the play of forces and of the differences of forces. Thus, the supplement is dangerous in that it threatens us with death…

The implicit is compulsive and compulsory, structurally necessary even as the speaking of that which is structurally necessary would dismantle the structure. This is deconstruction in a nutshell, at its best and in its most destabilizing. Immanent critique. Parasitic reading.

How is deconstruction a kind of theory of social death? And what does that mean for the figure of the slave in philosophy?

Rather than the slave as a topic of concern in particular philosophers, or as its place in the history of empire, I want here to think the figure of the slave on the model of Patterson’s famous account in *Slavery and Social Death*: the slave as the one who does not circulate in the social, who “is” (writing the copula as a hypothetical or against itself) as a sense of exteriority. Death before or outside of life. The sociological framing of the problem situates the question of social death in terms of belonging and exclusion, how exterior is produced by a matrix of social practices that manage bodies toward the end of radical exclusion. In this register of social death, Patterson writes:

[I]n the intrusive mode the slave was conceived of as someone who did not belong because he was an outsider, while in the extrusive mode the slave became an outsider because he did not (or no longer) belonged.
producing, then (non-)being-as social death. That is, the exilic experience as a mode of social death is complemented by the meaning of social death for the one who excludes, for the one who determines and initiates relations of non-belonging. Patterson explains this in reference to the analogy or parallel structure of caste and systems of slavery. Systematicity is the condition under which social death is produced and reproduced. “[T]he liminality of the slave is not just a powerful agent of authority for the master,” Patterson writes,

but an important route to the usefulness of the slave for both his master and the community at large…The essence of slavery is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death.⁶

The interstitial is always a conceptual problem. How to speak of the interstices, to the interstices, and from the interstices is dialectically engaged in Spivak’s title question and companion response: can the subaltern speak, and what would it mean to even begin to listen? This is no small question, but critical for any understanding of the history of social death as a cornerstone of centuries of imperial practice and thought.

And what does this mean for reading the figure of the slave in the history of Western philosophy? That can only be clarified, of course, in the exposition of each site and citation, but it is important here to indicate a pair of features. First, there is the question of exile. Patterson’s articulation of intrusive and extrusive modes of describe the constitutive function of the slave as relation. The slave is made in relation to the enslaver, and exilic conditions are produced out of that relation. Second, relationality for Patterson is articulated with a truncated dialectic. Perhaps this is a methodological or descriptive choice for him, understanding the production of the slave as a kind of sens unique, or perhaps Patterson simply chooses to focus on the enslaved and not on the mutual sense of dependency between enslaver and enslaved. Third, how we think the relationality constitutive of the slave’s exilic condition(s) is crucial. A dialectical invigoration of the site of relation quite naturally moves us to think this in Hegel’s terms, describing the intricacies of surprising and often dismantling ways in which the Lord lives from the Bondsman’s labor. But this also limits our scope. If we think dialectically about the site of relation that makes the slave’s exilic condition(s), then we also have to read that dialectic under the rubric of social death. How radically do we think about death and how does it alter relation to all elements of dialectical movement? Death as supplement to life-death stalls dialectic before it can even begin to do its work.

In a certain sense, this is merely the now-familiar path worn by deconstruction. Locating what fails to appear even as a failure of appearance functions as a decisive supplement that dis-ables the system in which dialectical movement (or any relationality that makes meaning and sense) lives, moves, and breathes. It is anti-ideological, it dis-assembles knowing and being. Death thought in this sense is exterior to life, outside the
economy of movement, rest, and stagnation, and is the removal of breath - the lungs that breathe, the logic of psyche, and so on - from any meaning of life.

It should be said that Patterson’s text does not think the death of social death in exactly these terms. The exile lives elsewhere in his account. Social death is haunted, to be sure, but it is also, therefore, made by the aspiration or waiting for and lingering in anticipation of life. That is, at first glance, for Patterson, death is made by life. Death remains inside the economy of life and its anticipations because the slave wants life against death. Indeed, this is necessary as an analytic precisely because Patterson needs to be able to describe both the world-making (in exilic sites and conditions) by the enslaved and the emergence of a total world at the moment of emancipation. This is the link between theory and the sociological, which binds theorization to the social lives of those who lived in, through, and in the wake of enslavement.

But the slave as a figure in philosophical thinking is not linked to the sociology of the life of the enslaved, and is instead linked to the thought-ful life of thinking itself. How does the social death of a figure at the foundations of – or maybe better, the origins of – thinking implicate, and therefore depend upon, an exiled absence? Not an exiled figure awaiting emancipation, but an absence, a socially dead figure, that has its sense of death doubled in the act of exile. This doubling of death entombs. It is not simply that there is death, but that death is buried in another movement of absence – the removal from presence as absence. Burying the dead in this way, not in the ground under our feet but on the margins of the world, the interstices, and away from sight, seals absence in absence. We can also think here of how Lisa Guenther remodels Patterson’s key idea in order to make sense of incarceration and solitary confinement. Solitary confinement, as a historical and contemporary practice of social death, isolates to the point of moving the cry of the incarcerated, the suffering of a body under carceral violence and its varied regimes, outside the space of seeing, hearing, touching, and knowing. This is a radical sense of the solitary, conceived not as a broken relation, but as a dis-lodging of the very idea of relation in the spatial move of the incarcerated outside our shared embodiment – however violent that embodiment might be.

Absence has its own quasi-life. The ground in which the dead are buried is vulnerable to chaotic seepage. The ghost appears from nowhere. The seepage alters our ground. The ghost disorients our sense of time, space, and dimensionality. These disorientations are fundamentally ethical, asking us to imagine obligation otherwise. The supplement, lived as a radical form of social death, does not simply dismantle. In the ruins of deconstruction, the dead obligate. il y a là cendre... And so our responsibility to what we cannot know begins as we unsay what we knew, how we configured Being and being, and all of that.
II.

How might this figure of the slave make and unmake the pretensions of the Western tradition? How is social death as supplementarity built into the tradition?

Reading coloniality - here as the figure of the slave – in the history of Western thought is a matter of reading for the visible: extant links to and systemic inclusion of what is other. Philosophy of race does this so well. But it is also a matter of reading under erasure, reading in search of the quiet supplement that is spoken, almost compulsively, at key theoretical moments. This reading casts dialectics as a form of assimilation to empire, a colonial gesture of adoption, adaptation, and inclusion of the socially dead in some form of life. In some ways, I think this reading under erasure is what Fanon wants from his decolonization of Hegelian dialectics in Black Skin, White Masks: to delineate the limits of the logic of comparison, then open the question of the outside, of what does not enter into that logic, and of what it would mean to think with that withdrawal and resistance. How does this outside appear as the figure of the slave in conceiving history, ethics, and propriety?

a. Making History

What is Africa to history?

Hegel’s dialectic remains, even for the most visceral critics, the enduring contribution of his thought to projects of liberation through revolt, contestation, and reconfiguration of each layer of knowing, being, and making in the aftermath of revolutionary resistance. It is also part of how we understand his philosophy of history to be entangled with the history of racism, currents of racial thinking, and the crisis of morality in the nineteenth century. Dialectics, at critical moments, needs social death and supplementarity to make the systematicity of his thought. And so Hegel’s philosophy of history, which has as one of its many aims the justification of colonial forms of empire and enslavement, is compelled to name the other of thinking in making sense of imperial history and its present. Hegel needs the exilic other of thinking, assigning it a sense of abjection that sits outside the movement of Spirit. He needs it because the abjection of the racial other, the African as an enslaved figure of thought, had long been (however quietly) contested space. Abolitionists, after all, had been critics for many decades and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, expansive and expanding vision of colonial rule and administration, and rigid classification of “the races” to the end of subjugation and differing forms of genocide. In their resistance, the abolitionists initiate a crisis to which all aspects of European thinking and culture were gathered in defense. Hegel was certainly a part of that moment. The philosophy of history and its dialectical structure plays a key role in imagining the West out of its moral contention and set of dilemmas. Thus, the question of race is both an example and the entirety of Hegel’s historical thinking, his thinking of history as History.
Now, on the one hand, the question of race in Hegel’s philosophy of history is actually quite straightforward. He characterizes Africans as a people without history, a people without a sense of language and cultural production that would set them on the world stage, and therefore as something akin to a trace or remainder in the movement of history and History. This is important for justifying colonization, what little remained in the 1820s of slave trading from the continent, and the ongoing practice of enslavement in the Americas. Hegel makes this argument for those concerned about the movement of History; without a place in history’s unfolding and set of contradictions overcome – dialectics as a theory of progress – there is no reason to debate or discuss the necessity of the African as contradiction. The African merely lies outside the movement of history. Predialectical with real existential and historical consequences. This is the kernel of the anterior or anti-logic in Hegel’s philosophy of history as he writes Africa out of history not as an aside, but as a decisive supplement. Or, perhaps more precisely, this is where he writes the unquestionable absence of Africa into, in the mode of hidden parasite, the unquestionable presence of Spirit – the supplement par excellence. I say unquestionable here because it is precisely in setting the figure – and it is merely a figure, a production of the colonial imagination – of Africa outside the interrogative. The interrogative is a space of dialectical possibility. But Africa is outside the question precisely because it does not have a declarative moment. Africa cannot say itself, and therefore it has no meaning. There is no vouloir-dire to be found in or on or around the continent. There is only the not-yet, which, rhetorically and politically is akin to a never-will-be, missionary fantasies notwithstanding. Hegel writes:

In this main portion of Africa, history is in fact out of the question. Life there consists of a succession of contingent happenings and surprises. No aim or state exists whose development could be followed; and there is no subjectivity, but merely a series of subjects who destroy one another...[I]n the interior of Africa, the consciousness of the inhabitants has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial and objective existence.\(^8\)

This declaration amounts to a claim, as Hegel puts it, that there is no relation of Spirit in Africa; “God, the eternal, justice, nature, and all natural things”\(^9\) stall dialectic before it could even start.

This is no small enigma for a thinker who imagines dialectic as the intervention that resolves contradiction as such, as a thought of totality, and thus an intervention that absorbs the disobedient work of contingency. Indeed, this is the entire revolution of Hegelian thought: overcoming the limits to thinking by thinking outside the dualisms hitherto (or so he claims) constitutive of European philosophy. And here is where Africa is both written out of history and the movement of Spirit and functions as an uncontrollable
enigma. How can you have a name without objective existence? To what does the name attach? We might say that, on the logic of Lectures on the Philosophy of History, Africa is a name that erases itself. Without substantality or objectification, Africa cannot be named except as a bit of theoretical ephemera.

In a certain sense, we can see how Hegel’s metaphysics of history mimics his account of the State, and that Africa plays the role of the rabble in his political philosophy: a radical exterior that confounds, from the outside, the movement of thinking. The outside that confounds is the intersection of deconstruction and social death, rabble and/or/as Africa – a dismantling of systematicity by what is both unassimilable in the system and what the system needs to mark the line between itself (capacity for assimilation, sublation) and what it is not and cannot be. Except that, in Philosophy of Right, Hegel’s rabble is an exteriority of violence, an incoherence that rattles the windows of power, oppression, and the dialectic of revolutionary political history. This is not Hegel’s name “Africa,” however, even as Africa appears in the philosophy of history as the unassimilable remainder. Africa is an exteriority to the system without even the pretense, aspiration, or illusion of presence. Africa does not appear as a threat to the system, but really just the limit of the system’s ability to engage with its contractions and (compromised) exteriorities. A socially dead name. Supplementarity.

And this is where we open up a different kind of reading of the African in Hegel’s philosophy of history, the necessity of the African in the very moment that the African is named, theorized, and (un-) integrated into the dialectic of historical movement and progress. We can think here, as a parallel case of sorts, of Spivak’s famous treatment of the practice of immolation in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” which refuses to speak for the widow or give the widow a voice or an explanation or a theodicy, yet inserts the practice of self-immolation at the center of a certain structure of meaning. Spivak does not let the subaltern speak; the answer to the title’s question is not that we cannot hear the subaltern, but instead that the economy of speaking erases the widow. Self-immolation is an act and also the structure of the supplement; the widow’s name and meaning is under erasure, settled as ashes of what never said itself. The supplement, the widow burned to ashes, incinerates itself, anticipating what Spivak’s theoretical comrade would later write as simply il y a là cendre... The ellipsis is crucial here: a trail that spaces out difference as différence, the gap and the infinite deferral structured by the refusal to appear. Refusal to appear, as we know all these years after Of Grammatology, is not the same as withdrawal from systematicity. It is rather the very foundation of a systematicity which is not one. Not just erasure through the author’s anti-mark. Erasure as the very condition of writing the name, a writing saturated with refusal to appear.

What is the African in Hegel’s philosophy of history if not this refusal?
b. Making Ethics

How does the South Sea Islander function as a figure of the slave?

Let us revisit one of the most familiar discourses of the Western tradition: deontology and its foundations, its systematicity. The categorical imperative justifies itself. Kant’s arguments are well-known and they deduce the legitimacy of the categorial imperative at the intersection of flawed counter-examples – juxtaposition does the labor of clarification – and the work of practical reason. But, like all work at such intersections, one can ask about the place of the example in the movement between deliberation – dynamic, flooded with the subconscious and subterranean discourses – and resolution. Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is the central text for deontology and its justifications, and it is worth revisiting a key section.

In his interrogation of the categorical imperative, Kant offers four examples of moral dilemmas, or at least questions for consideration, and then demonstrates how a rational creature might (or indeed must) will the maxim by which it acts to be universal law. That is deontology. This would seem to be as far from questions of the particularity of race and racial difference as it gets. Moral obligation is here being negotiated without reference to bodies, global contact, historical responsibility, or senses of social and political debt. And yet, Kant returns in the third example to a parenthetical on racial difference – the insertion of the figure of the slave as supplement, unprompted but also necessary for the systematicity of his account of moral judgment. “A third finds in himself a talent,” Kant writes, “that by means of some cultivation could make him a useful human being in all sorts of respects.” (73-75) Is it morally wrong to let his talents rust? Are we obligated to cultivate and live from our talents, such as they appear in our social and cultural lives? Kant’s conclusion is straightforward: we are obligated to render all capacities purposeful, developed not out of self-interest or self-benefit, but because the universal law of service to one’s talents. A very peculiar argument, one that struggles, quite frankly, to find its footing – and is so compelling for that reason alone. It is the most ambivalent of Kant’s for examples and his stumble to demonstrate the place of the categorical imperative only confirms that this case is on shaky grounds. And so he evokes “the South Sea Islanders,” a figure of the slave, writing:

Yet he still asks himself: whether his maxim of neglecting his natural gifts, besides its agreement with his propensity to amusement, also agrees with what one calls duty. Now he sees that a nature could indeed still subsist according to such a universal law, men if human beings (like the South Sea Islanders) should let their talents rust and be intent on devoting their lives merely to idleness, amusement, procreation, in a word, to enjoyment…
Like the South Sea Islanders. An entire people, not a hypothetical person. A class. A caste. A site in the citations of racial difference, hierarchy, and political disposability. One cannot but hear resonance of Kant’s anthropology in the example. If the South Sea Islander is “heard,” in a mode of the imposition of both the impossibility of speaking and the impossibility of being heard, in the register of a Kantian anthropology of race, then we have the subaltern, the supplement.

For anyone schooled in European philosophy, the Islander example is one of the most familiar passages in the history of ethics. And Kant’s point is clear, a conclusion that letting one’s talents rust cannot be justified as universal law. But what interests me here is the parenthetical, both how the reference (unprompted, yet essential) to South Sea Islanders functions in the argument and how the parenthetical works to both center and vanish the place of the racial other in this excursus. The South Sea Islander is critical for the argument. Kant presumes our disgust at the lazy body of the racial other, a repelling force that brings us back not only to practical reason but also racial pride, identity, and self-aggrandizement. We also do not hear the South Sea Islanders speak, we do not know why they appear to the European gaze as lazy and incapable of self-cultivation. What we hear is the white noise—literally and figuratively—of the European gaze; that gaze so overwhelms the object, the islander or islanders, that we see only our refusal of abjection. Perhaps we refuse that abjection because we know Kant’s anthropology of race—consciously or subconsciously—and presume that such characterological failure is largely impossible. Or perhaps we refuse that abjection because the parenthesis suspend the racial other in a non-world of comparison from which argument and demonstration lives, but with which we never enter into relation. The Islanders do not appear yet do appear. They appear as abjection so that the work of the system of deontology and philosophical identification can proceed, yet never appear, suspended in the parentheses, in their own position. It is a position entirely constructed and intrusive and extrusive conceptual-figurative exile. Socially dead. Yet, because juxtaposition and its affective life makes the argument work, wholly necessary in that abject, unrepresentable death.

c. Making Propriety
How does property make selfhood against the native?

Locke’s native, the “Indian,” is no small bit of his conception of property and propriety. To be sure, the text of the Second Treatise is framed by the problem of dominion and sovereignty, and how that problem is de-linked from fantasies about the natural order of authority over self and other. Locke offers both argument and polemic against defenses of natural hierarchy, but his vision of liberal political subjectivity and rights proceeds from a conception of work, nature, and self. Under the name “Indian,” this occasional mention shows up in the most important moments of Locke’s argument for that subjectivity. It is an
example that secures the argument. Consider the place of private property and labor when Locke writes:

[N]o body has originally a private Dominion, exclusive of the rest of Mankind, in any of them, as they are thus in their natural state: yet being given for the use of Men, there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them some way or other before they can be of any use or at all beneficial to any particular Man. The Fruit, or Venison, which nourishes the wild Indian, who knows no Inclosure, and it still a Tenant in common, must be his, and so his, i.e., a part of him, that another can no longer have any right to it, before it can do him any good for the support of his Life.10

Locke flirts with a promiscuous notion of the common, a notion that undercuts historical assertions of selective natural or divine dominion, but immediately pivots with the logic of “given for the use of Men” that links dominion, rights, and the extension of the subject to work. Work makes property of the world, making it mine when I labor to make “Inclosure” and also proving or demonstrating my proper humanity.

This passage is important for a number of reasons. First, it is Locke’s indication of what we might call a politics of epistemology, a sense in which knowing itself is forestructured by a characterization of the radically and racially political other. What it means to know place, how knowing place is critical to understanding self and property, is linked by opposition to how the political other (ostensibly) lives: a mere tenant. Second, it embeds the question of knowing and being to conquest and the Americas. The Indian is no mere occasional mention, but instead the moment in which Locke extends the politics of epistemology (and ontology) into the globalization of the human, a movement in conceiving the human and humanism that entwines philosophy with the justification of genocidal violence and mass displacement. The late-seventeenth century was of course simultaneously an age of liberation and an age of subjugation, which means that the human itself was being negotiated through encounters with and processing of difference. The Indian shows up here precisely because it is an historical event, situated between arrival in what becomes the United States and rebellion from the same. The colony stays on one’s mind. Locke offers a justification for genocide and mass displacement, not through racial hierarchy as such, but through a depiction of the fully developed, free subject set against mere tenants. Third, and deeply connected to this particular entwinement, it is noteworthy that this passage is immediately followed by Locke’s famous argument that links property, labor, and propriety. The labor of the body, which is mirrored or manifest in the reordering of nature, makes the world property and therefore justifies the assertion of ownership over land as a variation on a border right to one’s own self.
But none of this makes sense if “the Indian” offers a counterargument about tenancy and participation in the discourse of rights. If we grant Locke’s conception of being, knowing, and labor, then we see how the very idea of the human itself is forged in this critical juxtaposition. It is no coincidence that the passage on the Indian as tenant is followed by the explicit articulation of labor’s production of propriety. Without that juxtaposition, a theory of the right-full human is merely an assertion with no more grounds than Locke’s philosophical predecessor-opponents. Juxtaposition makes articulation possible, inserting the abjection of the Indian as a precondition of the realization of subject-formation through labor and nature. This work is done, not in the text itself, but in the space of erasure – quite literally in the absent space of the section break, between S.26 and S.27. A section break, but one that stands out as the gap between the Indian as mere tenant and the European nature-worker as the “Man [who] has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any right to but Himself. The Labour of his Body…”

This coincidence of the textual and the conceptual interstitial underscores the gap, yet proximity, between the abject Indian other and systematic exposition of the conditions for proper European or English subjectivity. Again, juxtaposition proves critical in both the affective and theoretical registers. Affectively, Locke introduces the Indian to set distance between readerly aspiration and the unthinkable lack, obstinate and inscrutable, in the figure of the Indian, the figure of the slave. The Indian is the theoretical or conceptual slave who does the labor to make ontological and epistemological wealth for the Englishman pondering landscape, but remains unremunerated, subaltern, immolated in the very act of naming. A decisive supplement.

III.

The complicated issue threaded across the reflections above is the place of the example in critical theory and philosophy. Perhaps one could simply propose switching out names for something more familiar and local. Perhaps one could simply say that Thomas, a lazy and lackadaisical Englishman who spends time in Jamestown, Königsberg, and the University of Berlin circa 1828, is our example and not the African, the South Sea Islander, or the Indian. And so perhaps the example and its racial-colonial histoire is merely occasional and not at all constitutive. This is the most sympathetic reading one could give. And it is not without rationale.

It will come as no surprise that I reject this sense of arbitrariness and interchangeability, if only to underscore the fact that each author deliberately, and we can assume thoughtfully, selected the examples at hand. Every example is its own kind of spectacle and event. Examples are exemplary. The event of anchoring theory in a site of iteration appropriates thinking. That is, we do not think to the example, but instead think from the example. The example carries or enacts a cluster of affects – that other other of systems – that make understanding possible. To wit: the scandal of the lazy islander, the
already abject word “Africa,” and the messy, inscrutable Indian activate the European intellect, by way of juxtaposition, to the point of identification. We see ourselves (and do not see ourselves) in the theory at the moment of the example. Philosophy is a site of self and other production, sure, but is also and emphatically reproduction. Exemplarity, then, is a sign of a pathology of enslaving the abject and inscrutable in order to reap the benefits of their labor while owing nothing. That is philosophy’s invitation. A colonial invitation through and through.

These figures are figures of social death, figures of the slave. They are dead to the theory and the death of the figure – the way it is erased in the event of juxtaposition – makes theoretical work work, conditions its possibility in juxtaposition with the affects such juxtapositions produce, reproduce, and build into the systematicity of the system. Unable to speak or participate, iterations of Spivak’s subaltern, the socially dead nevertheless do the unrenumerated work of theory while only appearing as an abject absence. The figure of the slave, the socially dead as supplementarity, works without compensation or presence in the system. The figure is a slave. European theory is the big house. All of Western philosophy suddenly appears as a plantation.

What, then, of decolonization and decolonial thinking?

I am reminded of one of the enduring lessons of Paul Gilroy’s 2004 book Postcolonial Melancholia: we have asked so much of the formerly colonized, but so little of the colonizer. That is, the colonized, in the moment of independence or revolutionary struggle and after, have always been tasked with the work of decolonization, to rid themselves of the structuring work of colonialism in political institutions, social habits, and cultural production. We can think here of Fanon’s theorization of decolonization in The Wretched of the Earth, which moves systematically through the composition of the postcolonial state with the aim of total violence: destroy the colonial, let loose invention and its possibilities for another kind of world. Or Aimé Césaire’s call for a humanism made to the measure of the world in his Discourse on Colonialism. There are so many examples.

But what has been asked of the colonizer, who lived in every aspect of life from the violence and abjection of the colonies for centuries? What would it mean to press the question of decolonization in this space? What would that do to the figure of the slave and how we read that social death supplement in canonical texts?

What work can we do with absences, with what has been written under erasure?

If absence has its own quasi-life – which is of course the paradox at the heart of deconstructive thinking, but also the life of the enslaved as socially dead – then it opens up the question of what it would mean to read absences as a way of reading the life of the figure of the slave. Reading absences, that is, not on the model of fashioning absence as another mode of presence, but instead absence as its own kind of style and economy with particular expressive demands. Here, I think, we see an emergent difference between what is asked of us in Derrida’s text and what is asked of us by the decolonized figure of the
slave. Derrida asks us to understand the inherent instability of systematicity. This is the danger introduced by “that dangerous supplement.” The figure of the slave does the same if we read the figure as a deconstructive introduction by authors of systematicity. But the figure of the slave is also a moment of refusal. That is, absence is simultaneously, in the figure of the slave, a moment of destabilizing danger and a refusal to appear, a moment of what Spivak describes in the example of the self-immolation of the widow in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Reading the figure of the slave deconstructively shifts when the decolonial frame is introduced as the life buried in the abject figure. How does that life speak? And what would it mean to speak and hear? In the decolonial frame, and this is decolonization’s common method, we move the center away from the system itself in order to catch sight of, in the reading of absences and of the unsaid in the saying, the life inside refusal. The lower frequencies, as Ralph Ellison has it at the close of Invisible Man. The doubled and re-doubled discourse of blues lyrics, of jazz sounds, of vernacular speech born of violence and abjection. That refusal of presence, which is the life that remains after the refusal to appear except as social death, except as absence, has a sense of life that is perhaps to be thought outside the economies of life and death and the radical, unnameable death that haunts those economies.

The figure of the slave, liberated from its place in an economy of abjection and juxtaposition, decenters to the point of eliminating the very idea of center. Without that center, speaking and hearing is different. A new humanism. A humanism made to the measure of the world. The figure of the slave read under erasure.

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1 For economy of expression and in accordance with professional vernacular, I will refer to the white West as “the West” and “Western.” The equivalence of whiteness/white people and “the West” or “the Western tradition” is something that needs to be troubled, as I have written elsewhere (John E. Drabinski, “Decolonizing the West,” in Decolonizing American Philosophy, eds. Corey McCall and Phillip McReynolds [Albany: SUNY Press, 2021]), because the black Atlantic world – the Caribbean, the U.S. and Canada, black Europe and Britain – is produced in, by, and through what we call “the West,” but that is not the focus of the present essay.

2 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980)


5 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 44.

6 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 51.

7 Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)


9 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 177.


11 Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 287.