Chapter 5 — Draft

The Surreal Presence (Négritude’s Messy Poetics)

Bidault, looking like a communion wafer dipped in shit . . .

— Aimé Césaire,
Discourse on Colonialism

there is so much the west is unable to digest / finds / unthinkable / does not wish to / perhaps cannot / assimilate without itself changing . . . / so perhaps ritual provides a way through the thicket of impossibles . . . / I am committed to retaining an ambivalence of the sacred object

— M. NourbeSe Philip,
“Wor(l)ds Interrupted”

Theory of blackness is the theory of the surreal presence.

— Fred Moten,
“Blackness and Nonperformance”

Fecopoetics :: “There is so Much the West is Unable to Digest”

I’m stuck in the mess of a communion wafer dipped in shit. It’s a mess that’s been messing with me, has had me all messed up. This chapter is an attempt to understand that shit, to understand that mess, that mass, to come to some sort of initial terms with the poetics of that mess. An aesthetics of fleshly mess—I call it a fecopoetics—négritude (a French neologism that I bring into English as “blackness”; more on this in a moment) names that effort. I want to think about négritude “in the wake” of the mess it finds itself in.¹ But I also want to think about blackness as its own kind of mess, the mess of generativity itself, an absolute excessiveness. I think here about blackness as a mess that exceeds the mess it finds itself in and that even exceeds itself. Négritude’s a mess, a runny mess, in this way. It is a placeholder for what’s on the run, what’s in fugitive motion. Errancy. Wandering. Runaway flesh, runaway tongues, speaking in tongues.

What if blackpoetics is a runaway poetics, a négritudinous practice that aspires towards alternative wor(l)ds on the run? What if blackpoetics is the practice of what this

world can’t hold, what roams the earth in haptic messiness, constituting deregulated communions? What if négritude ain’t clean, has no answers, eschewing the very carceral concept of the answer? What if blackness questions because it is a question? I’ve been trying to figure out how to even pose these questions, the question of blackness in its messy, messed up performance of a quest(ion)ing poetics. Fanon got close (“And now my final prayer, O my body, make me one who ever questions . . .”), maybe his teacher Aimé Césaire got closer (speaking of Césaire Fred Moten once mused, “Négritude is the univer-shall; What shall blackness become?”). In this chapter, I too make an approach, try to think with, try get with the poetics of the mess, the messy question of blackness—that excessive, excremental, serially extraceremonial quest(ion) of négritude. I want to think with Césaire (and some others too) as he thinks about this shit: “[Georges] Bidault, looking like a communion wafer dipped in shit.”

It goes back to when I first read Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* and his *Discourse on Colonialism*, two texts that themselves were trying to come to terms with the mess, with how in being messed with blackness was messing with stuff, practicing the alternative. Reading these texts took me me into the world of mid-1930s Paris. It was then and there that a group of “evolved” students from various French colonies gathered to express amongst themselves their disfavor of and resistance to French colonialism. Among them were Aimé Césaire and Suzanne Roussi (they’d eventually become partners), Léopold Senghor (who would become the future president of Senegal) and Léon-Gontran Damas of French Guiana. We might think of this “black gathering” as an early “sense lab” or an undercommon commune or maybe even something akin to those bedouin wanders that Nathaniel Mackey serializes in his poems “Mu” and “Song of the Andoumboulou.” I think of them as experimentalizers of a new term that was about to make its entry into a diasporic lexicon. Négritude is the name this band of anticolonial itinerants gave what they were doing—or what was doing or working on or messing with them.

As a neologism, négritude debuted in the pages of *L’étudiant noir*, an ephemeral periodical started by this Paris group as part of their political-artistic endeavors for an understanding of le négre—a term whose semantic range stretches from “the slave” to “the negro” to “the nigger” if not “nigga”—unmoored from the negative connotations surrounding this term in French culture. We might therefore say that as a concept négritude is an emanation of this diasporic study collective; it is both conditioned by this particular practice of sociality and conceptually a figure of it. More a verb than a noun, more a practice than a static idea, a term both of black performance (Saidiya Hartman and Gregson Davis might say) and nonperformance (Fred Moten following Sora Han

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2 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; look the essay where Fred says this.
might say), négritude indexes life-escaped and always escaping, life on the run, on the
move or in wandering, fugitive motion from colonialism’s dictates and French imperial
state holds. A locution then for “freedom as marronage,” négritude is against
ownership. It bespeaks life irreducible to and yet unthinkable apart from the wounds of
colonial dispossession—all in the interest, as Suzanne Césaire put it, of “the domain of
the strange, the marvelous and the fantastic” where we find “the metamorphoses and
the inversions of the world under the sign of hallucination and madness.” The zone of
the négritudinous indicates an otherwise congregationality. It indicates another kind of
mass. Lingering with Suzanne Césaire a bit more, négritude is a messy mass of
“unprecedented communions.” Parahuman futures.

My interest here is in a dimension of Aimé Césaire’s stamp on the négritude
concept; namely, how within his poetics négritude or blackness refigures the sacred,
unmooring it from sovereignty generally and from the would-be bodily coherence of the
self-possessed and self-determining subject of Enlightenment or secular humanism. This
is the subject of colonial whiteness. The refiguring of the sacred that I have in view with
respect to négritude and that I want to think about takes place precisely through the
“surrealism” of black life itself, a surrealism bound up with le negre, the one identified as
black and who within the terms of the brutalities of colonization and racialization is
deemed deficient, unable to perform as a proper body, unable strictly speaking to even
be a body, the one unable to figure as a rationally self-determining subject and thus
unable to represent the universal. A threat to universality and thus figuring as a
“horizon of death,” le negre, the black, is without a body. Or as Denise Ferreira da Silva
has put it, those so figured are “nobodies.”

Black nobodiness, ante-categorical thingliness, and thus bodily nonperformance
bears in Césaire’s poetics the name négritude, which in its performative nonperformance
exposes, I argue in what follows, the logic of Christian theology that animates a secular,
Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment modernity and thus that underwrites the French
imperial state and its practices of secular whiteness. More still, as the political-aesthetic
exposure of a Christian imaginary underwriting colonization-as-racialization, négritude
provides an angle from which to understand French imperialism, along with the
supporting apparatus of the state, as a claim to being a body. But this claim of bodily
coherence works by way of a series uncohering settler-colonial brutalities against flesh.

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3 The book Freedom as Marronage.
4 Suzanne Césaire, quoted by Robin D. G. Kelly in “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,”
introductory essay to Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 15–16.
5 For more on colonial-racial other as a “horizon of death,” see Denise da Silva, Toward a
Global Idea of Race.
6 Silva’s “ Nobodies” piece.
As an aesthetics of and “a permanent readiness for the Marvelous” that exceeds every Kantian injunction or any Enlightenment (categorical) imperative to be a body, négritude reveals whiteness as a god-term, the god-term of a God-Man, the would-be convergence of divinity and humanity to stand erect as a coherent and therefore a ruling or mastering body (politic). To put this in terms that W. E. B. Du Bois offers, colonial-imperial transcendence, with its “will to rule the earth, forever and ever. Amen.” is nothing less than “the religion of whiteness crashing upon the shores of our times.”

The critique of colonialism offered by Césaire opens onto a similar type of claim. He intuited that the vision of Western Man or the humanism that was the basis of whiteness’s trepassive transcendence, its practice of sovereignty, is but “Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations \( \text{Christianity} = \text{civilization}, \) \( \text{paganism} = \text{savagery}, \) from which there could not be ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the Yellow peoples, and the Negroes” (33). These equations, he says, makes “Europe . . . indefensible.” But to stop with such a statement as this is “in itself . . . not [yet] serious. What is serious” is that the very idea of “‘Europe’ is morally, spiritually indefensible” (32). I find this latter claim, which Césaire says is more serious, indeed to be provocative and worthy of interrogation. What is the precise nature of the spiritual constitution, of the spiritual indefensibility of the idea of “Europe” and of Western Man more broadly? How it colonialism and racialization indefensible at the level of or as a brutal practice of spirit?

Working between aspects of Discourse on Colonialism and Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, I engage Césaire’s poetics of négritude as clearing the way for the development of an analytic of colonialism precisely as suffused with certain theological protocols—“Christian pedantry,” as Césaire calls them—even as his négritudinous poetics enacts an alternative pedagogy of the sacred. This alternative pedagogy moves in directions that anticipate Édouard Glissant, whose “poetics of relation” entails “a modern form of the sacred” where within the terms of Relation “the sacred is of us, of this network, of our wandering, of our errantry”; Nathaniel Mackey, whose intertwined poems “Mu” and “Song of the Andoumboulou” enact a “recursiveness” or an “incantatory insistence” that amounts to an otherwise “liturgy and libation [of] repeated ritual sip, a form of sonic observance aiming to undo the obstruction it reports”; M. NourbeSe Philip, whose poetics of Silence “is committed to a retaining an ambivalence of the sacred object.”

More specifically, I argue that Césaire’s distinct insight lay in his consideration of the specific theo-political contours of the concept of the body—its functioning both at

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7 W. E. B. Du Bois, Dark Water
8 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 16, 56; Mackey, Splay Anthem, pg?; M. NourbeSe Philip, Wor(l)ds Interrupted.
the scale of the individual and of the state—as a figure of sovereignty, rule(s), propriety, and propertied ownership. That is to say, Césaire’s elaboration of nègritude opens up the question of the theological protocols of the body’s production, its coming into being as a cultural text, even as nègritude itself swerves from and is not of the body. A practice of errancy, nègritude moves as flesh, in the body’s break(down). A kind of unsettled compost given to new arrangements or fungible compositions, negritudinous flesh cannot help but decompose the body. As such, flesh is better understood along Glissantian lines as “baroque assemblages,” “that open and mysterious poetic necessity.”

Flesh “exhausts no territory;” it “sets roots only in the sacred of the air and evanescence.” Négritudinous flesh, which is to say blackness, is an atmospheric condition. Its home is “the commonplace,” an “undercommons” of impossible completion, operative at the interval between what Nathaniel Mackey speaks of under the rubric of “breath and precarity” and that Ashon Crawley and Peter Sloterdij theorize under the rubric of pneuma or spirit and as a “pneumatic pact.”

Pneumatography is a black poetics of flesh. And so is nègritude.

In staging my argument in these terms, I draw deeply on Hortense J. Spillers’ vital distinction between “body” and “flesh”:

But I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.

The body then is the yield of a series of cultural and biopolitical “maneuvers sequenced in blood.” These maneuvers indicate a series of violences against that which is deemed chaotic, unsettled or lacking order on the one hand but which on the other hand is desirable because it can produce and reproduce value. This terrain for expropriation,

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9 Glissant, Poetics of Relation,
10 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 208.
11 Spillers “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”
12 Ibid.
subjected to cultural and biopolitical maneuver, is what Spillers calls flesh, a kind of oceanic and deregulated materiality, the body’s ether.\textsuperscript{13} And yet, at the same time, as Alexander Weheliye has recently argued following both Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, flesh is always already the body’s undoing, its would-be apocalypse, harbinger of another world, a (re)turn to earth. In this way, flesh is to be understood as otherworldly, what this world has been brutally build on top of this one, witness that the world that claims to be all that there is in fact is not all there is. Things might be otherwise. Flesh witnesses to possibility, the alternative that indeed already is, even if overshadowed by monumental ideas and ideals—like “democracy” and “markets” and even “freedom” and “progress”—of this world. As otherworldly matter or the materiality of an alternative worldliness, flesh harbingers what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “Plenum,” that “Canvas Infinita” . . . “that [un-organizes], [un-forms], [un-thinks] the world” and where the multiplicity of “existing . . . chases away the dominant fantasies of a kind of knowing that can only determine itself if with iron hinges of universal reason.” These irons of universal reason, which poetics moves through and against, work conjunctively with or as epistemological support for the irons of the settler (to chain-link fence in land) and irongs of the colonial enslaver (to shackle of flesh). Vestibular to Man and his not-quite-human and nonhuman others, and in its anteriority to the body, flesh portends the end of the world (of Man); it is life otherwise.

I consider négritude as already functioning within something like Spillers’ body-flesh distinction; that is to say, négritude is (a)kin to fungible, generative flesh, or is a flesh-practice. More specifically, I read Césaire as providing insight into the religio-secular ceremony, the liturgical or ritual ceremony, of death-for-purposes-of-securing-life that grounds the body concept even as he poeticizes négritude as ante- (and not simply anti-) ceremony or extracereemonial and excremental to the ceremony of the body. It’s this ceremony that I want to scrutinize, for it is my contention that in this ceremony what is at stake is nothing less than the violence of ownership itself, a violence enacted as whiteness’ corporeal liturgy that renders blackness delectable or consumable. Such consumption is a technology of death by which whiteness figures as bodily capacity, as comportment to and within the time of the state-body politic. Eucharistic consumption, by which I mean a kind of violent ecstasies of trepassive wandering into lands on the one hand and the theft of labor on the other, is what discursively brings the body online and it what is constantly reenacted, alas as masterly humanism, to maintain the body (politic)’s “real presence.”\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{13} See J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak, “Black Ether.”
\bibitem{14} See Jasbir K. Puar, \textit{The Right to Maim: States of Debility/Capacity/Disability} (Duke University Press, forthcoming) \textbf{Check with Puar to see if I may reference her this way.}
\end{thebibliography}
In the next section of this essay I argue that Césaire finds a vantage of analysis on this problem by reading the eucharistic injunction given by St. Paul as the words of Christ at the last supper—“Take, eat, this is my body . . .”—as a social and cultural text, a figure through which to understand what he witnessed of the political deliberations in the French National Assembly on the occasion of his visits there in the aftermath of World War II. The Christian eucharist provided a script of imperial statecraft, a script of the machinations of the Enlightenment subject and the production and sustaining of the sovereign body through ownership. Functioning as a kind of cultural ritual of state, the eucharist within colonial discourse, Césaire suggests, yields a chrismatized, sacramental, or holy body, a redeemed and redeeming, capacitised and abled able body (of whiteness). Such a body claims the here and the now; it claims the real and thus claims to be real. It claims the onto-theological field of what’s real; it claims “real presence” for itself. Négritude is in part an analytic of this problem, a vantage from which to understand the Christian eucharistic liturgy’s discursive implication in whiteness as a colonial practice of cannibalistic consumption wherein blackness figures as debilitation and expenditure, as what buttresses but must be expelled from and then reincorporated back into normative time in the very quest to establish the normative as such, the body. Paying particular attention to the statement by Césaire that headlines the epigraphs of this chapter (“[Georges] Bidault, looking like a communion wafer dipped in shit . . .”), I work out this part of my argument about the ceremonial consumption and digestion of black life to mythify Man’s body (politic) as real by way of an engagement with Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*.

Following this, I turn from a consideration of modernity as a structure of colonial consumption to the vantage that makes possible this insight—négritude itself. That is, I consider négritude as a poetics of those alternative socialites that remain indigestible even as they are subjected to engulfment for purposes of standing up the body as normative form, as “real presence.” This indigestibility, what I speak of following Fred Moten as “the surreal presence,” is at the heart of the poetics of négritude that Césaire develops in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. I follow Césaire’s meditation, his quest(ion)ing after négritude, in key moments of his *Notebook*, coupling them with M. NourbeSe Philip’s poetics in her brief but powerful essay, “Wor(l)ds Interrupted”. I read this essay as extending Césaire’s negritude project (she actually invokes both Césaire and the notion of negritude) to elaborate her poetics. Perhaps its better to say that between Césaire and Philip, what becomes clear is that négritude, which is to say blackness, belongs neither to Césaire nor Philip. Moving against ownership and therefore against the logic of a body, blackness is unpossessable; following Sarah Jane Cervenak and Sora Han, it encodes a “paraphilosophy” of “parapossession,” indeed, of spirit possession. All of which is to say that between Césaire and Philip (whose *Zong!* is
the focus of the next and final chapter of this book), négritude figures as a blackpoetics whose extraceremonial aesthetic practice redoes ritual in its moving through the colonial pageantry of the body. Négritude proffers rituals of parapossessivity, rituals that take up the excremental, the “indigestible,” and the “unthinkable” as “[providing] a way through the thicket of impossibles,” rituals, as Philip puts it, “committed to a retaining of the ambivalence of the sacred object” in the practices of flesh.

*Eucharistic Violence // “A Communion Wafer Dipped in Shit”*

Let’s consider Cesaire’s statements more directly. The problem of the liturgy of the body emerges in a passage in *Discourse on Colonialism* that has gone generally unremarked upon in the critical literature but that anchors this meditation. It is a passage that, I argue,