Dreams are colder than Death (directed by Arthur Jafa, 2013), frame grab.

Black Care

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I. Black Care

On August 10, 2016, the Department of Justice released a report exposing disturbing practices in the Baltimore Police Department. It details the persistence of anti-black violence, abuse, inveterate neglect, and routinized humiliation. Graphs, statistics, and anecdotal narratives create a vicious tapestry of signs and symbols.[1] This tapestry requires deciphering, for what it says is more than just persistent injustice, but "something" else, which requires a different grammar. Rev. Heber Brown III, speaking to the *New York Times* about the report, recounts a disturbing instance. A teenage boy was stopped and strip-searched in front of his girlfriend. After he filed a complaint with the police department, the officer, it seems, wanted revenge and stopped the young boy again, strip-searched him, and this time grabbed his genitals. The officer, intoxicated by unchecked power over black bodies, wanted to injure "something" else, not just the teenager's body. The reverend states, "What that officer did is not just violate a body, but he injured a spirit, a soul, a psyche. And that young boy will not easily forget what happened to him, in public with his girlfriend. It's hard to really put gravity and weight to that type of offense."[2]

Rev. Brown introduces a "type of offense," which is difficult to decipher or translate into a framework of redress and injury. The offense he describes lacks a grammar to capture precisely the "target" of such violence. The phrase "a spirit, a soul, a psyche" moves us toward a conceptualization of this target, but it remains indecipherable in some sense, a "something" vulnerable to destructive practices. We can also understand the "strip search" itself as an allegory of anti-black

violence: what is stripped is not just clothes and garments, but something metaphysical, a metaphysical stripping away of the constitutive elements of a person's being. "A spirit, a soul, a psyche" is sadistically stripped and dishonored. The "gravity and weight" of the offense is the density of a metaphysical violence—in which black being is incessantly stripped, ripped apart, and humiliated. This violence is without end, without reprieve, without reason or logic. Both the metaphysical target and the violence are indecipherable because they constitute a non-sense sign within the grammar of redress and humanism. Put differently, anti-blackness renders both metaphysical violence and the "spirit, soul, psyche" untranslatable within ethics, law, and politics since these fields assume a coherent human ontology—and Blacks lack being. Furthermore, neither law, ethics, nor politics can adequately address "what" is injured (this "whatness" is invalid within its precincts); in other words, it cannot *redress* what it cannot *address*.

Black existence confronts metaphysical violence continually, without the possibility of political or legal reprieve (since the object of the violence does not translate politically or legally). Violence without end, violence without reprieve, violence constitutive of a metaphysical world (the violence sustaining the world's systems and institutions) is what the teenager experienced. The injury is, indeed, immeasurable—it fractures "something," a deep metaphysical structure. The question before us becomes: How does black existence address metaphysical violence? Moreover, can we even answer this question and with what grammar do we broach it? These are, indeed, difficult questions but our aim, here, is not to answer them apodictically (since such an endeavor is impossible), but to present a meditative strategy: black care.

II. Lacerations and Hieroglyphics

We can consider the metaphysical "injury" a laceration and a hieroglyph. What is "stripped" or ruptured leaves a mark—a sign of destruction that is itself a "witness" of the violation. As witness, the sign itself bears a tragic testimony, a recounting of the violence. But what is the sign *communicating*? The sign, the laceration, becomes a hieroglyph open to a cultural reading and hermeneutical practice. While what it says is not easily interpreted, it can be *felt* or registered on a different plane of existence. We rely on the affective dimension to translate the ineffable, or more precisely, to provide *form* for an experience anti-blackness places outside ethics and the "customary lexis of life and culture," as Hortense Spillers would describe it.[3] Feelings

provide a necessary vessel for containing unbearable suffering and a vehicle for communicating this experience when traditional avenues of communication are absent. Put differently, affect is a communicative structure, a testimony, for articulating suffering without end. The affective dimension is just as expansive as it is deep, so expressivity is boundless within this dimension. Affect is an invaluable resource for those enduring a metaphysical holocaust; it is the *premier* form of expressivity.

Spillers presents metaphysical violence as a "laceration or wounding." The undecipherable signs produced:

> ...render a kind of hieroglyphic of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic*

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substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?[4]

What is injured, then, is the "flesh"—the "primary narrative… seared divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard."[5] As a "primary narrative," the flesh is the metaphysical target of violence. The flesh, then, is the structure of black existence, an ontological grounding of sorts, which anti-blackness incessantly targets. It is the flesh that becomes injured, and this injury leaves a "laceration" or hieroglyph attesting to the brutality. Thus, the laceration is not just a corporeal sign; although the body might bear its marks, it is registered elsewhere.

But what is of interest here is that the laceration as hieroglyph might actually "transfer from one generation to the next, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moment."[6] The laceration *speaks* through symbolic substitutions across time, across generations. In other words, the laceration is a *constitutive feature* of black existence in an anti-black world, and it travels; anti-blackness mobilizes it across time (and space). It is indecipherable because it is paradoxical: it is consistent and substitutional, individual and generational, mobile and intransigent. One cannot capture it exactly as it

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moves across generations, but the metaphysical harm it indexes is felt deeply. Thus, what the teenager in Baltimore experienced was a *transferable laceration*, one which is flesh-destroying. The injury is much more than humiliation—rather, it is an onto-metaphysical destruction.

We might also inquire about the "efficacy of meaning," since the hieroglyph *means* even though it is indecipherable. Georges Bataille understands laceration as a possibility of communication, which leaves the subject fractured. Communication occurs precisely because the subject is not intact, which allows for something like a flow of communication. He says, "your life is not limited to that ungraspable inner streaming [mere inner consciousness], it streams to the outside as well and opens itself incessantly to what flows out or surges toward it."[7] Bataille suggests the laceration preconditions communication, since the laceration is a rupture, an opening that creates a nexus between inside/outside, self/other, and individual/community. I introduce Bataille, here, to suggest that what Spillers describes as an undecipherable marking, transferable across generations, is a *form* of communication—since this marking *speaks* and *means* by dissolving the distinctions between individual/community and inside/outside. The "efficacy of meaning" is found in the generational transfer itself.

The metaphysical laceration, furthermore, is an indecipherable

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sign that *must* be communicated, in order to recover the *efficacy* of (non)meaning. In other words, we may not know exactly what the hieroglyph "means," but the efficacy of meaning does not reside merely in certainty (the certitude of comprehension); instead, meaning's efficacy can be found in the *transfer* (or communication) of uncertainty. Transferring the undecipherable sign *through* and *as* communication (from individual, communities, and generations) provides a space of address. *Address without redress*. It is in the address—as the communicative flow of lacerative signs—that we are able to endure metaphysical violence. Even though we cannot eradicate metaphysical violence, since it is a constitutive component of an anti-black world, we can use the laceration as a vehicle for endurance: black care.

Christina Sharpe introduces the beautiful theory of "wake work," which "is a mode of attending to Black suffering and Black life that exceeds that suffering," along with her notion of "anagrammatical blackness," which fractures violent epistemic formations. She also conceptualizes wake work as "a problem for thought and care and trying to figure out how we might make operative care, wresting it away from surveillance and the state because the state also wants to imagine care but that care is the foot on your neck."[8] What, then, would it mean to render care operative? The industry of care is one of anti-black domination—institutions profiting on metaphysical violence and other forms of black injury. But wake work wants to re-imagine care, not as the institutionalization of management strategies, but as a "wake, waiting, a witnessing" of the always already dead thing. The theory of wake work is exceptionally generative and presents care as a "problem for thought," as Nahum Chandler might call it.[9] I want to linger in this problem, the problematic of care for a moment.

It seems as though part of the "problem of care" for black existence resides in the very term "operative." For the operation of care—its execution—requires attending to that which even "exceeds suffering." We might suggest that what exceeds black suffering (at least its corporeal instantiation) is the metaphysical dimension of violence—the active severing of the flesh, the laceration. We might also inquire what *form* does the re-envisioned operation assume—care *as* operation? In other words, how do you operate on that which is in excess of black suffering and black life? Sharpe's "anagrammatical" might assist us here, for the term suggests excess itself—an excess in relation to grammar (even an excess *against* grammar). The anagrammatical is operative *in* its excess, an excess of grammatical meaning. Anagrammaticity is a hieroglyph in relation to grammar; a non-sense sign.

Perhaps care is a *problem* for thought because "thinking" care (at least metaphysically and epistemologically) requires "sense." Our metaphysical conceptions of care translate all signs of injury and fracture into the grammatical, the domination of a hermeneutic of transparency. Foucault reminds us transparency (and institutional, medical "translation" as transparency) is a premier strategy of power, since bringing things into light renders them more vulnerable and accessible.[10] The problem with making care for Blacks operative is that the violation is opaque, indecipherable, and

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anagrammatical. Thus, we have to *re-envision* operation; instead of attentiveness through transparency (which is the strategy of surveillance and the state), operation entails the anagrammatical circulation of the non-sense sign. Rejecting the mandates of anti-black deciphering strategies and reconceptualizing operation as a *sharing* of the sign—a transferring and sending it forth, a form of communication.

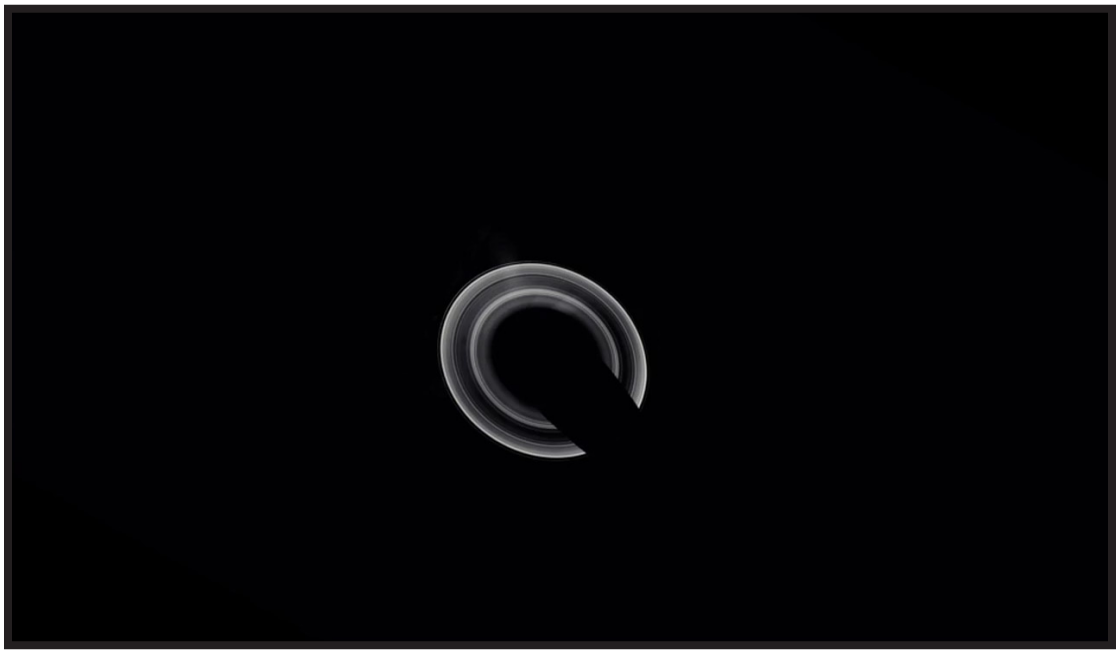
In other words, when the laceration cannot be decoded using traditional instruments of institutional care (i.e., the practices and procedures that translate the ineffable into an object of surveillance) because the target ("spirit," "soul," "psyche") is not understood as a legitimate target, the only way to address this violation is to rely on a collective sharing. The objective of this sharing is not to understand the laceration with apodictic certainty, but to remain open to its opacity—to receive its affect. Institutional care rejects this affect; in fact, it pathologizes it in order to justify invasive/violent practices. Sharing the sign, remaining open to its anagrammaticity is a form of black care.

III. Operations of Black Care

For black existence in an anti-black world, the problem is one of attending to a laceration, which appears across time, space, individual, and community. Furthermore, the laceration is *meaningless* as a sign for institutions using transparency and translation

as a strategy of domination and assault. “Black care” is a particular type of attentiveness or operation, since what needs caring for is something anagrammatical: “a spirit, a soul, a psyche.”

Black care is a network of strategies and practices entailing the circulation, communication, and sharing of the non-sense hieroglyphic. The objective is not to render the sign decipherable, since its meaning resides outside of a metaphysical world, but to share this undecipherable sign as a lateral practice. Circulation and sharing, then, are the *operations* of black care. I emphasize these two practices because much of the viciousness of the metaphysical violence is worked through alone. Shame enshrouds many experiences: having one’s competence questioned at work, encountering routinized micro-aggressions, facing insecurity and depression, experiencing



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"AFFECT IS AN INVALUABLE RESOURCE FOR THOSE ENDURING A METAPHYSICAL HOLOCAUST; IT IS THE PREMIER FORM OF EXPRESSIVITY."

strip-searches, and succumbing to self-destructive behavior and resignation are often internalized, or more accurately, *confined* to the internal. This is an aspect of metaphysical violence; one fears discourse about it and its circulation can often put one at risk if shared with an uncaring individual.

By "sharing" and "circulation" I mean providing expressive form for an indecipherable affect and sending it forth—to a collective, to a public, to a friend, a spouse, etc. Affect is difficult because one often experiences the torment as interior struggle—communication turned inward. The care I have in mind, here, would turn that communication outward, even if what one is feeling cannot be completely deciphered, one can still give it form—much like the hieroglyphic, for example, provides typographic form for an unknown message. The typographic form provides space, an openness, within which one can share its mystery—without a vicious "will to power" or desire to decode and dominate (as is the procedure of institutional care).

I have read Spillers, Bataille, and Sharpe together to offer an operation that envisions *communication of the non-sense sign* as an operation of black care. Much *work* is done in sharing and communicating. Since the laceration transfers and constitutes a flow of misery, it is only in and through communication that attentiveness can occur. I hesitate to use the word "healing," since this is often the "sign" of metaphysical

overcoming and domination, and anti-black violence continues without end and can never be overcome. But we might embrace the term 'endurance' as the objective of black care. To communicate the laceration, to share the generational and individual components of it, enables endurance. Not the endurance that yields resolution, but an endurance that is a lateral affirmation of injury—a recognition and embrace of the laceration.

We might turn briefly to the cinematic example of *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme, 1998).[11] Captivity is precisely the experience in which "a spirit, a soul, a psyche" is violated without end, and captives found a way to endure the incessant violation. Corporeal violence does not exhaust the field of misery and brutality; "something" else is violated. Baby Suggs, the spiritualist and exhorter, understands this and assembles captives in a circle. She instructs the women to cry "for the living and the dead just cry" (i.e. do not attempt to *narrate* the feelings with traditional language, "just cry"). She then instructs the men to dance and the children to laugh. Why would she do this? I suggest Baby Suggs has a deep understanding of black care. Laughing, crying, and dancing provide form for an indecipherable violation—one that language cannot adequately address (this is why she does *not* instruct them to speak). The captives, then, must rely on the "non-sense" sign (laughing, crying, and dancing), as institutional care would describe it, to give form to an affective dimension. Participants in the circle do not try to decipher each woman's cry, or decode each child's laugh, or translate the dancing into an apodictic narrative. Instead, the participants *share* the indecipherable sign—they circulate it between themselves—and they remain open to receiving the affect, even though a concrete meaning is impossible. The scene is instructive; it teaches us how to address injury laterally, when vertical redress is foreclosed. The circle is an allegorical space of openness (the geometry of flow and circulation); we must find ways to circulate the laceration in its myriad expressive forms.

Black care is an essential practice of attentiveness. Whether it is the chromatic melisma of a gospel jazz artist (such as Kim Burrell), the dynamic choreography of inspired dancers, the warm embrace of a friend, a cleansing cry, etc., the aim is to provide form and send it forth. These forms of expression enable us to endure the burdensome and bear what seems unbearable. This non-sense communication does not have to manifest itself in language, since the hieroglyph fractures the word itself. But it must

be communicated, even in "grunts, moans, [and] shrieks," or in what Fred Moten would call "sociality."[12] The operation relies on whatever forms of expression enable a "sending forth" of the hieroglyph. This sharing, sending forth, is a strategy of endurance; and enduring anti-blackness requires, above all, the operations of black care. ■

[1] U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, "Investigation of the Baltimore City Police Department," https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/883366/download (accessed August 10, 2016).

[2] As quoted in Sheryl Gay Sandberg, "Findings of Police Bias in Baltimore Validate What Many Have Long Felt," *New York Times*, August 10, 2016.

[3] Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, & in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 221.

[4] Ibid., 207.

[5] Ibid., 206.

[6] Ibid., 207.

[7] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), 94.

[8] Christina Sharpe and Selamawit Terrefe, "What Exceeds the Hold? An Interview with Christina Sharpe?" *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016). doi: 10.20415/rhiz/029.e06.

[9] Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem For Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

[10] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

[11] I chose the cinematic example because it depicts the operation of care so vividly. Toni Morrison's novel is indeed a masterpiece, but I focus on the cinematic adaptation since the visual scene is so very powerful. Actually watching the spiritual circle allows us to witness black care as a spectator, and I believe spectatorship has tremendous pedagogical value.

[12] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).