#### Black pessimism responds to the sound of ontological totality as catastrophe rather than recognition of its anoriginal recording that could be recognized as the interplay of rupture and irruption. Their criticism ignores the paraontological distinction between blackness and the person (thing) called black. In their instrumental antiessentialism silences that same force which renders their critique undone - black optimism as paraontological resistance – a race war for which no government may take responsibility and need not be decoupled from those forms that stand (in) for blackness.

Moten, F. (2008). Black op. *Modern Language Association of America*, 123(5), 1743-1747.

Black studies is a dehiscence at the heart of the institution and on its edge; its broken, coded documcumcuments sancnction walking in another world while passing through this one, graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth. The cultivated nature of this situated volatility, this emergent poetics of the emergency in which the poor trouble the proper, is our open secret. This open secret is the aim of black studies—a weight, a comportment, where what it is to carry converges with what it is to arrive, always more and less than completely. The critique of the structures and tendencies whose delimitation and denial of that aim appear integral to their own foundation has rightly been understood to be indispensable to black studies: “the critique of Western Civilization” is black studies, according to Cedric Robinson, which is to say that what is called Western civilization is the object of black studies. This black optics is an auditory affair: night vision given in and through voices that shadow legitimate discourse from below, breaking its ground up into broken air; scenes rendered otherwise by undertones that are overheard, but barely. (Consider the rustle of a garment as the open, internally noncoterminous, interrogatory punctuation of a collective chop or clap; the worked, songlike irregularity animating Andrew Cyrille’s brushed analytic of flavor; the breathy tortuousness of Jeanne Lee’s brightening of taste; the seen, seared, heard, sheared relation between what is there and not there, on the outskirts of all belonging, that the music gives.) Bearing vast repertoires of high-frequency complaints, imperceptible frowns, withering turns, silent sidesteps, and ever-vigilant attempts not to see and hear, black studies’ pleasurable series of immanent upheavals and bad, more than subjunctive moods are the critique of Western civilization. Often this critique shows up in a range of unpaid, imposed pedagogical duties carried out at various faculty meetings and conferences; in all its justifiable, fetishized performativity, it is often manifest as a sublation of anger mistaken for uncut ire or the absence of ire. Black students have to think about the give and take of such surplus being stripped from the thickness of their skin, then decide that it is best understood, best distilled, as the mood for love. This is why Robinson is equally adamant that black studies’ critical modalities are driven toward and directed by an aim—the ontological totality and its preservation—that, in all its secret openness, is called blackness. Black studies’ aim has always been bound up with and endangered by its object. When the prosecutorial gaze that is trained on that object (Western civilization) passes over that aim (blackness, which is not but nothing other than Western civilization), the danger is brutally, ironically redoubled. Talk of the preservation of the ontological totality produces great consternation in certain circles, which is unsurprising given the scarred, grainy, phonic inscription that accompanies such utterance. When that sound is received as mere catastrophic effect, as an always-already-broken acoustic mirror, critique turns into litigation in the hope of silencing it. But catastrophe must be sounded for the terrible, beautiful resonance it bears of that anoriginal recording of constant incision and expansion whose irreducible priority persists only insofar as preservation is transformation. It is in the recognition of the interplay of rupture and irruption in and as the given that black studies’ aim and object intermittently, inconsistently, but serially reconvene, again and again momentarily escaping danger. Black studies break/s a rhythm whose tactile complexity must be maintained while moving in and out of the institution, where smooth abrasion never seems to have a chance. Black studies’ inordinate feeling for divisions and collections requires every last bit of texture, as an opening gambit held in reserve—the “paraontological distinction” between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black. In abiding with this distinction, one might instantiate an adequate challenge to the voraciously instrumental antiessentialism, powered in an intense and terrible way by good intentions, that sanctions black studies’ ongoing struggle with the misplacement of its aim and object. A kind of carelessness is revealed—as if the truth of old-new things is made available through their neglect—when invocations of home are subject to the continual misrecognition of their perpetual ideation of perpetual motion, while claims on homelessness are held to be everything other than the most radical mode of being-in-the-world. Similarly, when the strained desire the history of thinking imposes on those who have to think their way out of the exclusionary constrictions of that history succumbs to the antierotic power of summary judgment, the work that emerges is undone by what it misses. Behind such pseudocritical nonsolicitousness often lies a conflation of totality and the specter of a still univocality from which an etiolated idea of blackness is derived in order that it might be rescued by appeals to multiplicity that never fully regulate their own dismissive impulses. In fact, to be down with the dialectic of home and homelessness within which blackness persists, a dialectic that n(eg)ation language seems to bring into the sharpest audiovisual relief, one must have indexed (but more than this—grasped and inhabited in order to have thrown and departed) the ensemble of uptown operations that are migration’s precedent, held, as they are, in captive movements that still take place and flight up the country. The mysteries of a certain kind of locomotive whine are always given and withheld by way of the underwater cables some alien folk lay down when they are barred from travel and forcibly removed. The submerged span remains as its own convention. So that out of the unjustified margin between the ascription of contagion as slur and the vicious infatuation surveillance imposes, blackness is a general, material aspiration, the condition of possibility of politics understood, along but also off Foucauldian tracks, as the irreducible unconventionality of race war—covert, gentle violence in the midst of conversion, an effect of conversion and imminently convertible in and as this essence of covering rolled back (flourished, ex-caped) and aggressively forgiving modesty. No government can take responsibility for it, however much it emerges in and out of governmental conditions; at the same time, it remains unresponsive to the governance that it calls and the governments that it rouses. The paraontological distinction brings the secrecy and openness of this gathering into relief as well. All this—which was always so essentially and authentically clear in its wrought, inventive, righteous obscurity—now often suffers being revealed and reviled in critique that advances by way of what is supposed to be the closure of authenticity, essence, and experience, all of which continue to be made to share the most precise and predictably easy-to-dismiss name, local habitation, and communal form of life. That blackness is often profiled and found wanting what it is and has, in work that involuntarily falls under the admittedly imprecise rubric of African American studies, is also unsurprising and is due not so much to chauvinistic reactions to real or perceived chauvinism but to the fact that blackness’s distinction from a specific set of things that are called black remains largely unthought. Paraontological resistance to this particular brand of orthodoxy requires a paleonymic relation to blackness, which is not in need of a highlight it already has or an extrachromatic saturation it already is or a rampant internal differentiation it already bears. As such, it need not be uncoupled from the forms that came to stand (in) for blackness, to which they could not be reduced and which could not be reduced to them. What is often overlooked in blackness is bound up with what has often been overseen. Certain experiences of being tracked, managed, cornered in seemingly open space are inextricably bound to an aesthetically and politically dangerous supplementarity, an internal exteriority waiting to get out, as if the prodigal’s return were to leaving itself. Black studies’ concern with what it is to own one’s dispossession, to mine what is held in having been possessed, makes it more possible to embrace the underprivilege of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape. The strain of black studies that strains against this interplay of itinerancy and identity—whether in the interest of putting down roots or disclaiming them—could be said, also, to constitute a departure, though it may well be into a stasis more severe than the one such work imagines (itself to be leaving). In contradistinction to such skepticism, one might plan, like Curtis Mayfield, to stay a believer and therefore to avow what might be called a kind of metacritical optimism. Such optimism, black optimism, is bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the appositional, runaway, phonoptic black operations—expressive of an autopoetic organization in which flight and inhabitation modify each other—that have been thrust upon it. The burden of this paradoxically aleatory goal is our historicity, animating the reality of escape in and the possibility of escape from.

#### Blackness is prior to ontology – the project of Black optimism is an exploration of “existence without standing.” Black life is lived in political death, irreducibly social, and held in hope that blackness is the pathogen that has the potential to end the world.

Moten, F. (2013). Blackness and nothingness (Mysticism in the flesh). *South Atlantic* Quarterly, 112(4), 737-780.

Over the course of this essay, we’ll have occasion to consider what that means, by way of a discussion of my preference for the terms life and opti- mism over death and pessimism and in the light of Wilderson’s and Sexton’s brilliant insistence not only upon the preferential option for blackness but also upon the requirement of the most painstaking and painful attention to our damnation, a term I prefer to wretchedness, after the example of Miguel Mellino, not simply because it is a more literal translation of Fanon (though often, with regard to Fanon, I prefer the particular kinds of precision that fol- low from what some might dismiss as mistranslation) but also because wretchedness emerges from a standpoint that is not only not ours, that is not only one we cannot have and ought not want, but that is, in general, held within the logic of im/possibility that delineates what subjects and citizens call the real world (Mellino 2013). But this is to say, from the outset, not that I will advocate the construction of a necessarily fictive standpoint of our own but that I will seek to begin to explore not just the absence but the refusal of standpoint, to actually explore and to inhabit and to think what Bryan Wag- ner (2009: 1) calls “existence without standing” from no standpoint because this is what it would truly mean to remain in the hold of the ship (when the hold is thought with properly critical, and improperly celebratory, clarity). What would it be, deeper still, what is it, to think from no standpoint; to think outside the desire for a standpoint? What emerges in the desire that constitutes a certain proximity to that thought is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology; or, in a slight variation of what Chandler would say, blackness is the anoriginal dis-placement of ontology, that it is ontology’s anti- and ante-foundation, ontolo- gy’s underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space. This is to say that what I do assert, not against, I think, but certainly in appo- sition to Afro-pessimism, as it is, at least at one point, distilled in Sexton’s work, is not what he calls one of that project’s most polemical dimensions, “namely, that black life is not social, or rather that black life is lived in social death” (Sexton 2011b: 28). What I assert is this: that black life—which is as surely to say life as black thought is to say thought—is irreducibly social; that, moreover, black life is lived in political death or that it is lived, if you will, in the burial ground of the subject by those who, insofar as they are not sub- jects, are also not, in the interminable (as opposed to the last) analysis, “death-bound,” as Abdul JanMohamed (2005) would say. In this, however, I also agree with Sexton insofar as I am inclined to call this burial ground “the world” and to conceive of it and the desire for it as pathogenic. At stake, now, will be what the difference is between the pathogenic and the pathological, a difference that will have been instantiated by what we might think of as the view, as well as the point of view, of the pathologist. I don’t think I ever claimed, or meant to claim, that Afro-pessimism sees blackness as a kind of pathogen. I think I probably do, or at least hope that it is, insofar as I bear the hope that blackness bears or is the potential to end the world.