

Nana Adusei-Poku  
**On Being  
Present Where  
You Wish to  
Disappear**

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In 2009 the Centre Pompidou in Paris opened an exhibition called “Voids: A Retrospective.” Through works such as Yves Klein’s *The Specialization of Sensibility in Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility*, it explored a tradition of radical curatorial and artistic interventions touching on the “art of nothing.” The exhibition consisted of empty spaces in which nothing was on display, apart from the white walls and wooden floors that constituted the architecture of the rooms. The decision to recreate the peak of minimal art and show nothing but emptiness or the absence of objects is intriguing. It can surely reignite discussions about the exhibition space as an artwork in itself, or, as in the example of Maria Eichhorn’s project *Das Geld der Kunsthalle Bern*, it can stress the economic dimension of institutions and the cultural practice of exhibiting.

The notion of nothing in art also inspired the Swiss conceptual artist Andreas Hausser to create the virtual No Show Museum in 2013. (The title of the show is borrowed from a work by John Barry.) No Show Museum is a museum of nothing with four hundred virtual pieces, a customized bus that works as a mobile exhibition space, and, most importantly, the framing of *nothing as an aesthetic*, which is a long-standing tradition in (Western) art. For Hausser, Barry, and the curators of “Voids,” nothing is universal. The claim of nothingness and the void as universal connects to the aesthetic gesture of an empty, often white-painted space, whilst the question of experience remains disconnected.

But does nothingness have to be empty, related to white, and, ultimately, be a shrouded representation of whiteness? Are empty spaces really, as John Barry claimed in his “No Show Museum” piece, quoting Marcuse, “places to which we can come, and for a while ‘be free to think about what we are going to do’”?<sup>1</sup> Is there really such a thing as no-thingness when you encounter an empty exhibition space? Is nothingness an aesthetic, or can nothingness be foundational for a coming-into-being – a gesture of multiplicity rather than a gesture of absence? Who has access to this space of freedom to think about “what we are going to do”?

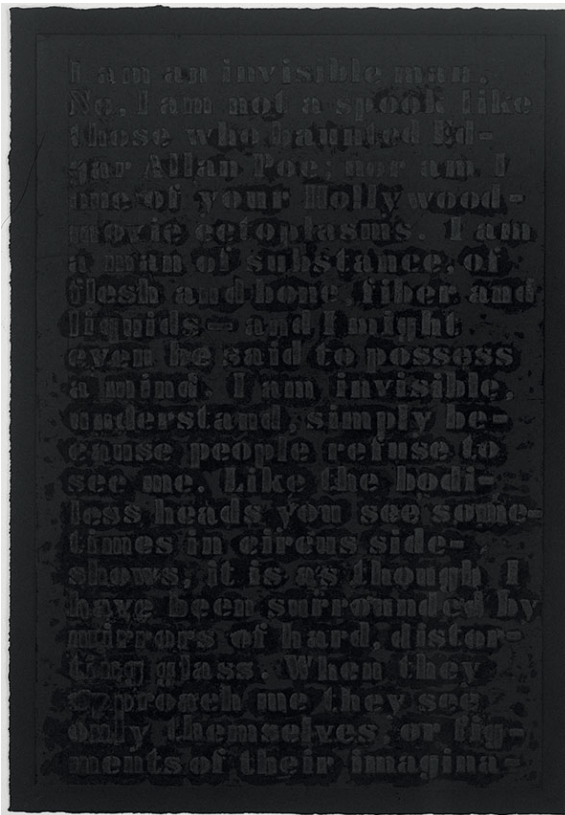
#### **Parallel Univers(es)als**

Nothingness can mean something very different when it comes to black experiences. David Hammons’s *Concerto in Black and Blues* (2001) allowed entry into a space of profound nothingness in which blackness didn’t serve as a means to a universal framing. *Concerto in Black and Blues* consisted of an empty exhibition space without light. Visitors were given blue flashlights to use in their efforts to traverse the

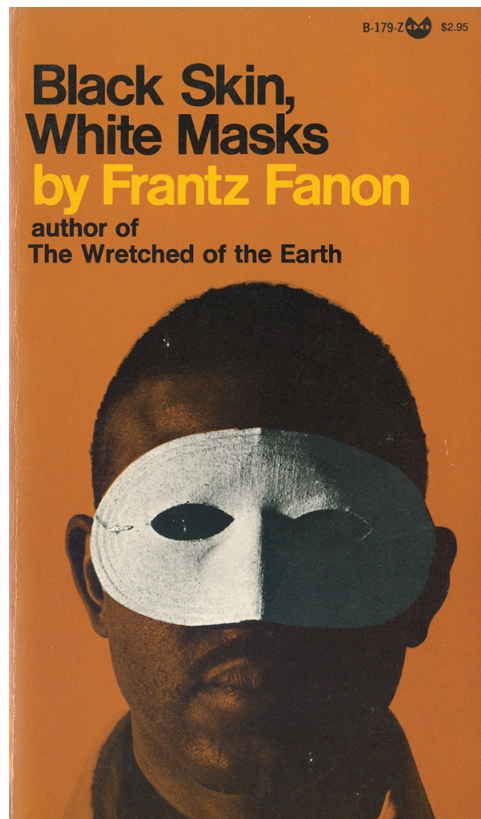
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Robert Barry, *Some places to which we can come, and for a while "be free to think about what we are going to do." (Marcuse)*, 1970–in progress, 1970, Kunsthalle Bern, 2009, installation view.



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (Four Etchings)*, 1992. Softground etching, aquatint, spit bite, and sugarlift on Fabriano. Edition published by Max Protech Gallery. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967).

space. Inevitably, this not only created an intrinsic relational dependency among the exhibition's visitors, but also allowed a space characterized by the absence of installed things, sounds (despite the concerto in the title), and objects to be filled with a dense sociality. Silence – but also rhythm, as insinuated by the title, which draws on jazz and blues traditions – was present. *Concerto in Black and Blues* is an art piece intrinsically bound to black experience – an experience of the abyss, losses, emptiness, a different temporality, and voids. Or, as Édouard Glissant writes, it is an experience – emblemized by the belly of the boat that delivered so many bodies to the unknown – “pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death.”<sup>2</sup> Although these lives appear bound to social death, *Concerto in Black and Blues* brings blackness into being through an intrinsic sociality that is experienced in the dark as deeply relational. Hammonds creates this relationality through the aesthetic gesture of composing a concert of bodies that try to navigate the dark, caught between objectification and agency. *Concerto in Black and Blues* can be connected to the Middle Passage – foundational for modern thought and practices of colonization – through which enslaved human beings were placed within the realm of the particular. This installation produces an experience of particularity within multiplicity, which contrasts with the idea of a universal perception of nothingness, because it becomes a relational experience. Nothingness becomes foundational for black existence through the passage from singularity into multiplicity.

This experience of nothingness, bound to black experience, is absent from shows like “Voids” and No Show Museum, which make a claim to a universal (objective) status. The absence of the black experience remains foundational and marginalized for the whiteness that fills these spaces. How to bridge this consistent ontological gap in the framing and making of art?

Such questions are challenging for those who want to be allies and advocates for the subversive power of art. They begin in the most intimate and painful spheres of our sociality and demand that we think beyond the threshold of the institution. Equity is not going to be achieved via policies, temporary projects, and fellowships for people of color. To claim that an empty space is a place where we can come and think about what we can do carries a universal that neglects those who have no access. Or who have access but won't be heard. Or who have a different experience of whiteness. If this myth of the universal remains unchallenged, the desired possibilities of decolonization and equity will

remain neither in the future nor in the present.

### The Black Abyss

The void appears when one sees history repeating itself. The abyss is the *Ohnmacht* from which one doesn't want to awaken.<sup>3</sup> And nothingness is shelter whenever lived experience falls outside the parameters that determine and delimit the idea of the human – lived experience that, in turn, inevitably announces itself as a challenge to the idea of the human itself. The black abyss is deeply social, specific, and intimate. It is the void that calls blackness, in all its heterogeneity, into appearance. The void is the foundation of the black subject consistently displacing the ontological, insofar as blackness is, as Fred Moten puts it, without standpoint, or rather, the very refusal of a standpoint that is foisted upon it through its social and ontological construction. Refusing this standpoint is blackness's way of remaining in the belly of the boat that Glissant names as foundational to its experience. In other words,

[It] is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulatory power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology ... It is the anoriginal displacement of ontology ... It is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space.<sup>4</sup>

It is, in short, a refusal to accept the ontological paradigm that currently organizes the world; it is a way of revealing itself as prior to the deployment of this paradigm as an organizing force (rather than just a descriptive tool) in determining social relations and all that is forced to exist beyond them.

It is little surprise, therefore, that this notion of nothingness is a consistent theme in black arts and knowledge production. The void is always nearby. Here it is in Fanon:

I feel my soul as vast as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers; my chest has the power to expand to infinity. I was made to give and they prescribe for me the humility of the cripple. When I opened my eyes yesterday I saw the sky in total revulsion. I tried to get up but eviscerated silence surged toward me with paralyzed wings. Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.<sup>5</sup>

Fanon describes an embodied feeling (knowledge) of powerfulness and determination.

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Infelicitously explained through a series of ableist metaphors, this knowledge meets a series of constraints established by forces that come from outside of himself.<sup>6</sup> He can't get up, and even the silence that overtakes him is eviscerated and held immobile by paralyzed wings. He remains stagnant. He seems without agency, stuck between antithetical conceptions – Nothingness and Infinity – of the unimaginability and endlessness of space and time. This triggers the physical reaction of crying. It is a search for relief, for ways of coping with this impossible juncture at which he is stuck. Fanon describes a liminal space, intrinsically bound to the imperial project, generated by it.<sup>7</sup> It is a space that produces an experience that is not universal. Nor does it rely on any universal ground. It is a very particular experience, which finds a multiplicity of articulations. It is also an experience that, stuck between Nothingness and Infinity, may recode this Nothingness, this void against which an immobilized subject finds its form and perhaps the route of its flight, through the variegated content that is made available to it in the form of particularized experiences. Or alternatively, in highlighting a liminal space, Nothingness is inevitably recoded as a foundational ground, or as anti-/ante-ground, as a void that sustains.

This black abyss, which in the Fanon passage starts with a negative connotation that we find can be overwritten, is rich with knowledge and potential. It is incomparable, perhaps wholly unrelated, to the nothingness that often fills empty museums. The nothingness that Audre Lorde spoke out from, that Fanon was trapped in, that Fred Moten versifies, that Miles Davis and Dorothy Ashby riffed on – this nothingness is not absence but foundation. It is multifarious and stands in stark opposition to any white absence of understanding and space.

The urge to embody and think the universal – as in the No Show Museum – has to be questioned. Deployed during the Enlightenment as a reiteration of the Aristotelean polis, the universal is a “structure, not an event,” as Sara Ahmed puts it. The nation-state rose on this structural foundation of the polis as an “assembly,” through which inclusion as well as exclusion was established. This assembly is foundational for “modern” thought and hence the concept of the universal is connected to exclusion, which produces the “particular” relational experience of (non)existence. The universal “is how those who are assembled are assembled. It is how an assembly becomes a universe.”<sup>8</sup> The universal is a structure of thought, a condition of possibility for knowledge production, and only a few whose epidermis seems absent of melanin are privileged to hold

that space (seemingly for eternity, sacrosanct for critique) in our contemporary culture.

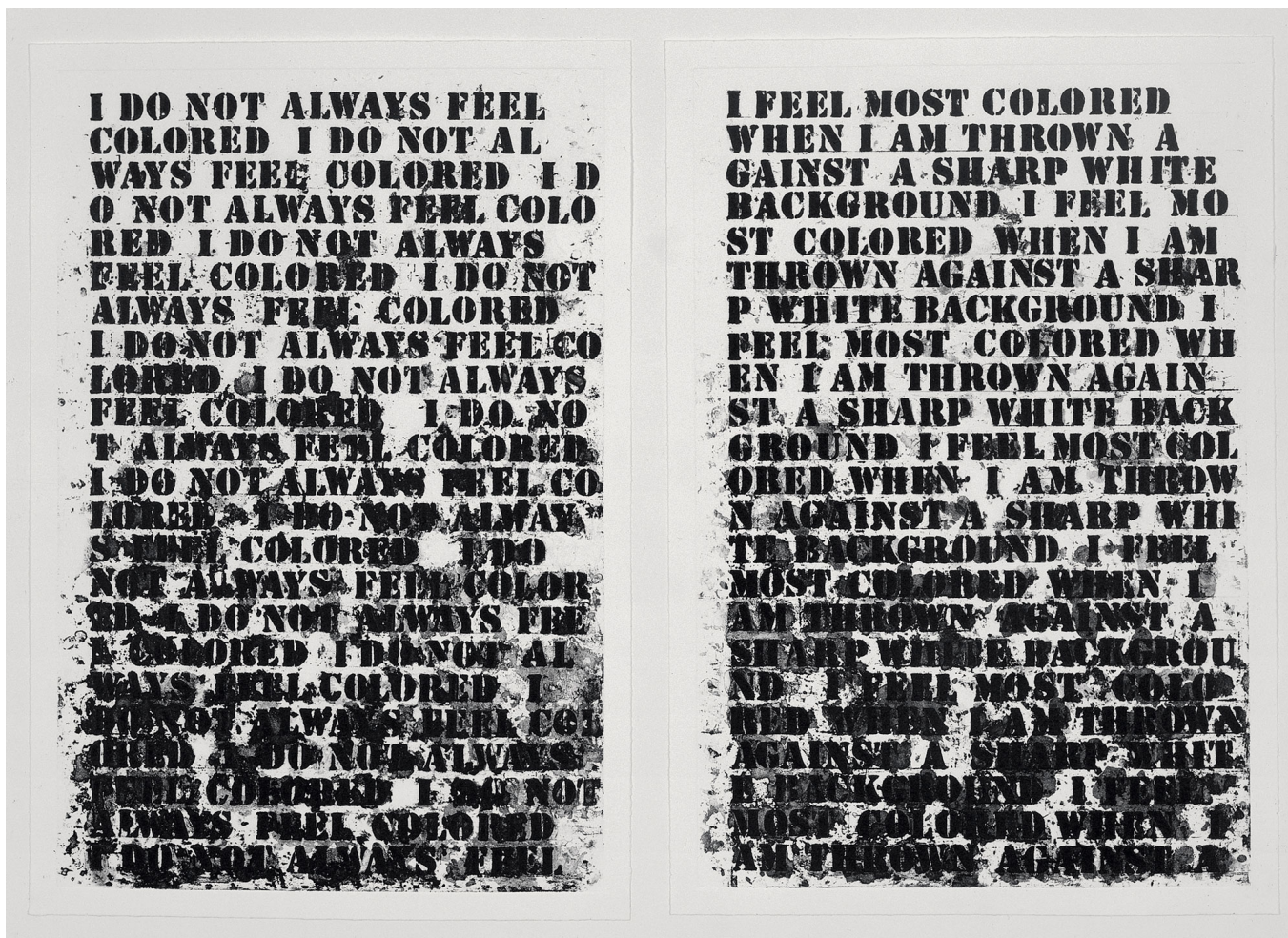
### Passages into the Particular

For Édouard Glissant, every diaspora is a passage from unity to multiplicity. And it is the space of multiplicity that allows the “knowing body,” as Suely Rolnik calls it, to be unique and absolute within its core without being threatened by particularity. Without the implementation of this understanding, Glen Ligon’s *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, for instance, remains one dimensional. After all, the “I” it signals can be read from multiple angles, as a multiplicity without unifying core: as the “I” of the painter; as the “I” of the author of the sentence quoted in the title (Zora Neal Hurston); or as the “I” of a plethora of black people (itself a multifarious assemblage, a refusal of sealed totalization<sup>9</sup>) who can immediately associate with the experience of objectification and framing through whiteness. What remains, however, are words on a painting that start to smear into an unreadable mass. What starts on the top of the painting as a self-repetitive clear text dissolves into a mass of overlaying unreadable black layering of the same text. The particularity of each vowel vanishes into an illegible mass that creates a chorus of words, a choir that calls the edges of the painting into a polyphonic dialogue. In the same way in which the letters become unreadable, the black paint opens space for multiplicity, where blackness can remain in its complexity, understood as a “social hyperconscience,” as Glissant describes the experience of enslavement and its aftermath.

In contradistinction to what the space of multiplicity allows, in mainstream media this multifarious blackness is continually reduced to black male bodies being slaughtered. Through solely focusing on black cis men, mainstream media and certain forms of activist organizing implicitly hinder the possibility of justice and equity from coming into being. Acknowledgement of black queer, trans, gender-nonconforming, disabled, and femme voices is necessary and would undermine any single narrative of blackness and oppression. This is why campaign slogans such as “Say Her Name,” as well as artworks that reference Black Lives Matter, are not – intrinsically and practically – part of mainstream media. By definition, they stand outside of the guiding, organizational paradigms of mass media as it exists today. And in this way, they challenge its natural proclivity to round things off through recourse to pared-down figures to represent (or rather, dilute) experiences that assume a fugitive role precisely through their variegated natures and

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Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (Four Etchings)*, 1992. Softground etching, aquatint, spit bite, and sugarlift on Fabriano. Edition published by Max Protech Gallery. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

particularity.

Neither the claim to be a (hu)man (and a brother/sister) nor the claim that one's black life matters are new, of course. And yet the necessity and urgency to emphasize and articulate the worth and matter of the lives of black human beings, as well as to highlight the systematic neglect of black thought, remains unabated. In fact, it has remained unchanged since the inception of the imperial project, with settler-colonialism and its accompanying enslavement forming the colonial matrix of power. This matrix expresses itself through various means, from mainstream media to biennials and e-artworks.

One of the pitfalls of the imperial project was that it promised freedom and agency through reason, and at the same time, it produced the dominance of reason, slavery, exploitation, genocide, and crimes against humanity.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, something went wrong.

"We are on the edge of an abyss." So wrote Cornel West regarding the times to come in the US.<sup>11</sup> But it's not just the US that faces a fascist era; the whole world is in for a scary ride. As we confront this growing fascism in the US and around the globe, it is important to ask if we have ever been *out* of the abyss, considering the slow violence and trauma that have persisted in the wake of the imperial project.

Questioning the past emphasizes the limits of the present. In 1964, in the wake of the shooting of James Powell, an unarmed black fifteen-year-old, by police in Harlem, Kenneth B. Clark said that the incident had to be examined not purely as a crime problem, but as a social problem. This statement has not lost its urgency. Clark pointed out that "the chronic day-to-day violence against the human spirit which exists and is accepted as normal" is at the center of this social construct. But what forces allow this sociopolitical crime to prevail? Is it just a question of governmentality and capitalism? It is so easy to turn against entities such as institutions, when they are run by individuals who obey administrative tools. This acknowledgement is not about shaming the individuals or solely turning against the state apparatus. It is about critiquing both. Or to put it simply: I am tired of excuses from curators, artists, theorists, and critics alike every time the intersectional complexity of the subjects they address is overwritten by the comfort zone of their professional indifference.

The present shows that our lives, knowledge, and resistance seem not to matter. On the other hand, our black creativity and style, which have for centuries been means of survival, are lucrative. I am happy to watch more black (queer) women on television, but I don't see them in higher education. The abyss is in the heart of

the education system.

Thirty years after Clark offered his analysis, the theorist Sylvia Wynter stated in an open letter to her colleagues that the epistemological foundations of dominant forms of thought are one key source of the "chronic day-to-day violence" Clark spoke of. Intellectuals and scientists, argued Wynter, reproduce the epistemological foundations for this violence by treating these foundations as objective and universal.

### **We Know What Needs to be Done. How is the Question.**

What I see in the academy and the museum is that black and postcolonial scholars and artists repeat the aforementioned claims (with nuances) – but they create for a space which reciprocates nothing. On the contrary, this space consistently challenges the validity and profoundness of their voices. This compartmentalization is a key problem when it comes to the pedagogical project to distribute black thought. We learn how to learn in the absence of our voices. Black (female) writers and artists in particular are tokenized in order to not only represent an authentic black experience, but also to "enlighten" predominantly white classrooms, conferences, and peers. While some might argue that the willingness of white students and teachers to learn about their role in the world could be considered a first step into a productive dialogue, playing the "indigenous interpreter" limits our possibilities and has a very important function in keeping white hegemony intact.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, this kind of dialogue has its limits if black scholars, with their embodied knowledge and expertise, remain at the periphery of curricula, canons, and teaching faculty. The problem is structural as well as personal.

The absence of black thought in the arts and in education creates an "acute paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination ... rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism ... an exercise of power bereft of any pretense of the exercise of vision."<sup>13</sup> History is without guarantees, and the abyss we are facing has changed. What kind of exercises of vision do we have to imagine now?

There is no healing presence when the wounded past is erased from our cultural memory and archive. The void this erasure produces fills empty gestures with violence rather than possibilities of relation.

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1  
Herbert Marcuse, "An Essay on Liberation," 1969. Available at marxists.org <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/1969/essay-liberation.htm>.

2  
Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6.

3  
I am deliberately not using the English translation of "powerlessness" for the German word *Ohnmacht*, as in *Ohn-* (deriving from *Ohne* = without) and *Macht* (power), because the construction "in *Ohnmacht* fallen" is a phrase in German used to describe fainting, a somatic reaction to being overpowered by forces outside of one's body. To wake up from *Ohnmacht* would be described in German as "zu sich kommen," which means to come to oneself. Hence, the process of being *Ohnmächtig* is connected to a detachment of the self from the body.

4  
Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 739.

5  
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 119.

6  
Despite my fascination, I think it is always important to stress that Fanon's writing was deeply heteropatriarchal. See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

7  
When I write "imperial" I am referring also to its aftermath, which Alexander Weheliye has poignantly described as "the uneven global power structures defined by the intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism, which interact in the creation and maintenance of systems of domination; and dispossession, criminalization, expropriation, exploitation, and violence that are predicated upon hierarchies of racialized, gendered, sexualized, economized, and nationalized social existence." Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1.

8  
Sara Ahmed, "Melancholic Universalism," [feministkilljoys.com](https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/12/15/melancholic-universalism/), December 15 2015

9  
I am drawing on Glissant's notion of totality, which he explains as follows: "At this point I need to explain what I mean by this totality I have made so much noise about. It is the idea itself of totality, as expressed so superbly in Western thought, that is threatened with immobility. We have suggested that Relation is an open totality evolving upon itself. That means that, thought of in this manner, it is the principle of unity that we subtract from this idea. In Relation the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity. Let us say this again, opaquely: the idea of totality alone is an obstacle to totality." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

10  
See *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World*, ed. Nikita Dhawan (Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2014).

11  
Cornel West, "Pity the sad legacy of Barack Obama," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/barack-obama-legacy-presidency>.

12  
See Daniel Matlin, *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

13  
David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.