

## Habeas Ficta

### Fictive Ethnicity, Affecting Representations, and Slaves on Screen

Tavia Nyong'o

Can slavery be represented on screen? The question may sound rhetorical. Ever since D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* revolutionized the medium in 1915, slavery—and the repression of the afterlife of slavery—has been constitutive of cinematic representation. Indeed, one way to chart the history of Hollywood melodrama has been through its ever-shifting strategies for holding a distorting mirror to the spectacle of slavery and the lived experience of the slave. Linda Williams, for example, has carefully reconstructed the historical interplay between sentimental and melodramatic spectacles of black suffering in U.S. cinema. Without attempting to review the history of slave representation on screen comprehensively, this chapter does propose to describe four strategies that have crystalized recently: the *sentimental*, the *antisentimental*, the *pornotropic*, and the *counter-pornotropic*. Through this admittedly schematic rendering of the affective genres through which the slave is brought to impossible presence on screen, I aim to forward a second claim: I argue that the emergence of ethnic and national difference within screen representations of chattel slavery is not a recent phenomena, but a problem built into the im/possibility of representing the slave as such.

In what way can slave representation be said to be im/possible, that is to say, both possible and impossible, without recourse to any “final analysis” that decides between the two? Film and performance theorist Frank Wilderson has influentially argued that the slave represents a constitutive *antagonism* in the U.S. social order, an antagonism that is hidden by the social

*conflicts* that racial melodrama wrestle with and seek to narratively resolve.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on traditions of political theory that construe the social as riven by antagonisms (and the quixotic attempt to suture them), Wilderson has innovated a distinctive brand of criticism that assigns to the slave a position of structural lack, a “nothingness” from which no affirmative or resistant representation can emerge. If such a critique stops short of prohibiting cinematic depictions of slavery as such, it does at least point to the need to reformulate the question with which I opened: can *slaves* be represented on screen? Or is cinema always already an apparatus for slave capture?

What does it mean to approach cinema as an apparatus of capture? My own response to the scenario of structural antagonism and ontological capture Wilderson presents is guided by Fred Moten’s provocative work on blackness, criminality, and cinema. In particular, in this chapter, I follow Moten’s argument that the blackness *interpolated* in between cinema’s vaunted “twenty-four frames a second” can be read contrapuntally against the blackness *interpellated* within the narrative the cinema sets in motion. Of cinema, Moten notes: “Motion within the frame is stilled so that motion between frames can be activated. Here’s where fidelity and capture converge. Seriality makes a motion out of stillness, a one out of a many: so that the essence of cinema is a field wherein the most fundamental questions are enacted formally and at the level of film’s submission to the structure of narrative. At the same time, *blackness—in its relation to a certain fundamental criminality that accompanies being-sent—is the background against which these issues emerge.*”<sup>4</sup>

In the above passage, Moten reads the cinematic apparatus as containing a break between the visible and invisible; one that animates and is animated by blackness. The structural antagonism that *forecloses* blackness from affirmative representation thus *depends* upon blackness to produce its affecting images. In this chapter, I employ the shorthand *in/visibility* to

refer to this interplay of blacknesses, which provides a context for thinking through the im/possibility of slave representation. Absence and presence, lack and excess, blackness and nothingness: these terms all find new significance in the theory of screen memory that Moten's account of black fugitivity ushers in. I take this distinction between formal questions of narrative or generic strategy, on the one hand, and the ontology of screen capture, on the other, as axiomatic for any subsequent detailing of genres that, in their disjunctive synthesis, risk contravening the assertion of a general antagonism underlying representation (not just filmic representation, but politico-aesthetic representation as such within societies structured in racial dominance).

Can the varieties of slave experience on screen be approached with the tools of critical ethnic studies and affect theory, as well as black studies? This question returns us to classic accounts by Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, Stuart Hall, and Étienne Balibar, by way of more recent formulations by Kara Keeling and Alexander Weheliye. My aim in retrieving the concepts of “new ethnicity” and “fictive ethnicity” from those earlier debates is to redirect a nascent polemic—waged in particular over Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave*, but also, more generally, the casting of non-U.S. black actors in African American roles—over who has the “right” to represent U.S. slavery and its afterlives cinematically. While I cannot address this polemic in any substantial way, I point to a necessary prolegomena to any such discussion: How do black ethnicity and nationality figure in relationship to slave affectivity on screen? Is ethnicity accurately understood as that which the U.S. slave is natally alienated from, and must reclaim via a diasporic trajectory? Or has a certain troping of black ethnicity always been constitutive to how blackness emerges into in/visibility on screen? As contemporary cinema continues to “migrate the black body” across its planet-dominating apparatus, at speeds that sometimes cause national

distinctions to blur; as black writers, actors, directors, and producers increasingly tackle stories of slavery shipped from and to various parts of the globe at disparate points in history; as all this continues to happen I believe we now need to attune ourselves to a blackness that is *internally differentiated and differentiating*, agonistic and aleatory as well as antagonistic and structured in lack. Beyond the choice between an optimistic or pessimistic orientation towards the truth of our case, can we better comprehend the dark and divergent powers of the false?

It could be argued that the in/visibility of black affectivity is precisely what cinema, as an apparatus of slave capture, sets out to repress. Frantz Fanon's account of the "racial epidermal schema" might corroborate this account of cinematic indifference to black diversity. But to leave matters there would be to rest superficially at the visible skin of blackness.<sup>8</sup> The work of Leigh Raiford and Maurice Wallace has, on the contrary, shown how formalist readings of the technical limitations of photographs miss their power to performatively intervene within crucial episodes of black struggle.<sup>9</sup> Their work leads me to agree with visual theorist David Marriott when he concludes, in the midst of a recent reconsideration of Fanon's account of the colonial gaze, that "we can no longer consider black film as merely contingent to the problem of time or the Other's gaze."<sup>9</sup> Marriott draws our attention to how Fanon's black filmgoer, in moving from colony to metropole, experiences a shift in "racial historical schema" (Fanon's term for how histories of slavery and colonialism congeal in black affectivity) and is disoriented by the sudden foreclosure of the prior possibility of identifying with the white hero.<sup>10</sup>

"In the Antilles," Fanon writes, "the young black man identifies himself de facto with Tarzan versus the Blacks"; it is only upon re-viewing the film in Paris, among whites, that the migrant sees himself on screen *as black*, as if for the first time.<sup>11</sup> Marriott makes the case here for what we might call, after Jean Copjec, the "di-phasic onset of time" in black spectatorship.<sup>12</sup> The

African blacks (white actors in blackface in the 1932 *Tarzan*) that the young Antillean sees on screen are in/visible at home: the shock of their presence comes when that first impression is overlaid and retrospectively crystallized by an experience of metropolitan racism. The twin movements of diasporic migration and the cinematographic animation of the black body on screen are herein articulated.

*Tarzan* belongs to a historical moment before the varieties of slave affect we are now interested in here were projected in cinema. Then, the “Negro” was little more than a natural slave, whether in the United States or Africa, whether under colonial rule or Jim Crow. Marriot, therefore, rightly makes Fanon’s account of *Tarzan* key to what he terms “a racism tied to an experience of rupture and crisis and corresponding with the breakdown in the narratives of colonialism, and the emergence of neo-liberalism, in modern cinema.”<sup>13</sup> This is also therefore the period in which we can undertake a consideration of the “new ethnicities” that emerge in the wake of the scientific-racist image of the Negro.<sup>14</sup> What happens in Fanon’s account when diasporic blacks encounter themselves, in the screen travesty of the tribal African, as a certain kind of ethnic “as if for the first time”? Can the diphasic onset of such ersatz recognition proceed otherwise than through political closure and ontological lack? Or can we think about other varieties of slave affectivity, legends and myths that may travesty historical truth but, in so doing, open out the virtual past for another mode of becoming?

### Habeas Ficta: Rethinking Fictive Ethnicity

Is ethnicity, however, the right keyword for such a thought? The concept has enjoyed a recent revival under the rubric of *critical ethnic studies*. This revival has, unfortunately, led to the pitting of “ethnicity” against “race” within contemporary academic interdisciplinary

knowledge formations. Skeptical as I am that a full or final vocabulary adequate to the critique of our present can be found, I will sidestep this particular dispute and deploy both as incommensurate terms. In this regard, it may be useful to return to Stuart Hall's influential essay, "New Ethnicities," for a reminder of how ethnicity has in the past forwarded a "politics of criticism in black culture."<sup>15</sup> While the concept of ethnicity proposed in Hall's 1989 essay may no longer be tenable, the "end of the essential black subject" that his essay announced did presciently usher in the study of aesthetics as a site of black agonism:<sup>16</sup>

Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into *the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate*: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem *to threaten the collapse of an entire political world*. Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction.<sup>17</sup>

Although neither ethnicity nor aesthetics are directly mentioned in this passage, the fundamentally *agonistic* conception of politics Hall evokes in his image of "the maelstrom" is one precipitated by his account of the passing away of certain "necessary fictions" regarding the identity of interests. Yet if "race" operates, within the anti-essentialist politics of this essay, as the necessary fiction, then the "new ethnicity" it proposes is not yet a stable truth. I will return to this ambiguity later in this chapter. Here I only suggest that, in this image of agonistic argument

and debate, Hall opens up his concept of ethnicity to an aesthetics in which it is also possible to imagine another set of reversals, not the “simple” reversal Hall bemoans, but a more complex passage through the sentimental and antisentimental, the pornotropic and counter-pornotropic I sketch here.

The reversals I seek here for the concept of ethnicity are founded on its vexed relation to the “real” (in particular the vexing, empiricist belief, which I reject outright, that ethnicity is somehow “closer” to the truth than race as a social construct). The contrary possibility, of a dialogic reversal between “real” and “fictive” ethnicity, is corroborated and deepened in Étienne Balibar’s influential definition of nationalism as “fictive ethnicity.” For Balibar, as for Hall, fictive does not mean illusory or inefficacious, but is offered “by analogy with the *persona ficta* of the juridical tradition in the sense of an institutional effect, a ‘fabrication.’”<sup>18</sup> As Balibar noted in 1991: “No nation, that is, no national state, has an ethnic basis, which means that nationalism cannot be defined as an ethnocentrism except precisely in the sense of the product of a *fictive* ethnicity. To reason any other way would be to forget that “peoples” do not exist naturally any more than “races” do, either by virtue of their ancestry, a community of culture or pre-existing interests. But they do have to institute in real (and therefore in historical) time their imaginary unity *against* other possible unities.”<sup>19</sup>

In this formulation, historical time intervenes to convert ethnic, racial, and national fictions into real unities. Here we must return to Wilderson’s haunting reminder that such a passage of civic time is always conducted over and against the figure of the slave, held outside historical time. At the same time, we might retrieve from Moten’s dialogue with Wilderson another vision of politics, one that is subtended by the *im/possible unities of blackness* that

disrupt any sense of historical time that cinema or any other apparatus of ethno-national capture may secure.

In contemporary black cinema studies, the work of Kara Keeling stands signally for generating an affective politics of such im/possible unities of blackness. Keeling mobilizes the “witch,” a figure who scuttles between “a sustained analysis of contemporary processes” and “a critical interrogation into the enslavement of Africans”; the witch is key to my argument insofar as I follow Keeling’s call to account for what she calls the *black femme function*: “a portal to a reality that does not operate according to the dictates of the visible and the epistemological, ethical, and political logics of visibility.”<sup>20</sup> In the interstices of blackness out of which the illusion of cinematic motion leaps, we try to follow the flight of the witch who guides us towards “undecidable, unlocatable, nonchronological pasts, presents, and futures.”<sup>21</sup> Keeling’s work invites us to think the inside/outside of cinematic production through a queered concept of affectivity that will be essential to my concluding sketch of the counter-pornotropic.

How might such an attention to cinema as affective production address the “migration of the black body”? I have already suggested, following Moten, that the technology of motion capture is also a technology of fugitive slave capture. The black radical aesthetic he extolls is an aesthetic of fugitivity, and the debate between him and Wilderson is conducted on the basis of the im/possibility of escape from the slave ship’s hold. For Wilderson, the negation of blackness is the basis out of which civil society and its ethno-national cinematic life is animated; for Moten, blackness is the negation of civil society, on the basis of which social life can flourish.<sup>22</sup> For myself, I hew closer to Moten’s version of negativity than Wilderson’s. I also draw on the negativity in José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification.<sup>23</sup> Disidentifying with fictive ethnicity, I will suggest, is not so much a fantasy of escape as it is a mode of working on and

through the *persona ficta* of the screen slave. To anticipate my subsequent discussion of Alexander Weheliye's provocative call for *habeas viscus* (produce the flesh), perhaps the move here is towards *habeas ficta* (produce the fiction).

Returning to the diphasic onset of black diasporic affectivity, we begin to see how the screen affectivity Keeling tracks must take shape within *duration*. The Bergsonian-Deleuzian concept of duration Keeling draws upon, as film theorist Thomas Kelso explains, does not refer to simply a period of measurable time, but “itself implies the real but virtual coexistence of the present and the entirety of the past”—a coexistence, film theorist Peter Gaffney further notes, articulated as the distinction between ordinary memory, adapted to presentist concerns, and recollection, or “true memory,” a memory that “remains ‘suspended’ above the contingencies of the present moment, ‘truly moving in the past and not, like the first, in the ever renewed present.’”<sup>24</sup> I offer this brief exegesis of the concept of duration within the theoretical paradigm that Keeling moves in, in order to forestall a literalist misapprehension of her argument that would see in specific elements of cinematic technique—such as the montage or dream sequence—a visible “portal” to nonchronological time. Her argument, to the contrary, is ontological, and bears upon blackness as the invisible ground out of which such visibility springs. Sensing the cinematic apparatus from the point of view of the black audience that waits “in the interval” for the appearance of black images on screen (images that induce “tense muscles” as the living past is contracted into the violent subordination and ordinary expropriation of the present), Keeling posits an intensive space of the virtual wherein black cinematic duration can exceed the representational aporia.<sup>25</sup>

The power of Keeling's approach, in my estimation, is the balance her readings achieve; construing lack and antagonism within a theoretical field that sustains black desiring-production.

Black emotivity following the witch's flight diagrams an alternative mode of existence that is indicated nowhere in the fixed and reified images of race, gender, and sexuality of narrative cinema. Escape and confinement are not an either/or proposition in Keeling's view of duration; they immediately imply and are entangled with each other. Cinema as an apparatus of capture would appear to leave the black body nowhere to go, and to deny any sense in which, as Moten claims, objects resist.<sup>26</sup> But the witch's flight induces a different sense of black becoming than one of enframed by lack.

In my larger project, I am concerned with where the rhetoric of constitutive lack and its *aporetics of loss* may be leading black criticism. However useful, lack can be both overdrawn and oversimplified. Furthermore, as Nathan Widder shows, political ontologies of lack can, with only a minimal gesture, tip over into ontologies of excess.<sup>27</sup> The enigmatic difference of a blackness that never emerges into the agonistic play of representational opposites is, from this vantage, both a lack and an excess of representation, much as the black space between frames of cinema, on Moten's account, provides the unseen background to the illusion of visible movement. It is within this zone of indistinction between lack and excess, between negation and affirmation, that I engage the titular problematic of this book: migrating the black body. Consider this problematic grammatically: "migrating the black body" is a sentence fragment, a gerund and predicate without a subject. The black body does not migrate; it is *migrated*. In Harney and Moten's terms, we can say that the black body is *shipped*. By what agency is this (violent) movement accomplished? Shall we align this movement with the racial-colonial genealogy of the cinematic apparatus? And what would it take to render this apparatus inoperative?

Although I opened this chapter by suggesting there are at least four contemporary modes through which slave affectivity is represented on screen—the sentimental, the antisentimental, the pornotropic, and the counter-pornotropic—time and space permit me to make my case through a discussion of just two films about slavery—*Mandingo* (1975) and *Manderlay* (2005)—and one postcinematic case of screen memory I will briefly discuss in my conclusion.<sup>28</sup> I have deliberately selected two films which foreground the fictive construction of black ethnicity. In neither case does the film appeal to ethnic realism or authenticity (in contrast to, say, a film like *Roots*). Although one is a mainstream exploitation movie from the 1970s and the other recent art-house cinema (whose existence was brought to my attention through the critical reading of it provided by Wilderson), both derive their power from a frank depiction of the depraved craving for black flesh, as Weheliye describes it, a craving that violently fragments the black body into something both films, in different ways, mark as “ethnicity.” In harnessing slave ethnicity to the work of black degradation and white depravity, these films set into motion an “ever-so-slight vacillation” that, for Weheliye, indicates “a conceptual galaxy” beyond Western humanism: our affective pursuit of the witch’s flight may lead us toward the “differently signified flesh” of *habeas viscus*.<sup>29</sup> My concern here will be the agonistic black diasporic productivity of ethnic fictions, *habeas ficta*, as a provocative supplement to this “ever-so-slight” space of *habeas viscus* that Weheliye convincingly outlines.

The popular novel *Mandingo* (1957) by white American author Kyle Onstott was the source of both the 1975 film and prime culprit for the widely circulated myth that slaves in the American south were “bred” for gladiatorial fights to the death. Its *Mandingo* slave protagonist, Mede (portrayed by Ken Norton), must navigate a cascade of deprivations as he is bought and sold, competes in death matches, is forcibly bred with other slaves, coerced into sex with his

white mistress, and finally, boiled alive by his jealous and despotic white master. In associating this myth with a particular West African ethnicity, the Mandinka, Onstott lent his pulp fiction historical verisimilitude (much as deriving Mede's name from the Greek myth of Ganymede lent his sadistic homoeroticism a knowing air of camp classicism).<sup>30</sup> The "Mandingo" slave, that is to say, was *both* an ostensive retention of African ethnicity and a *persona ficta* of U.S. slaveholding. *Mandingo*, appearing just as the wave of the civil rights and decolonization movements was cresting, is an astonishing effort to capture and destroy, within the cinematic apparatus, the homoerotic, hypersexualized image of the rebellious black slave. It is an ur-text of cinematic *pornotroping*, to use Hortense Spiller's useful term.<sup>31</sup>

Today, the film's lurid representation of rape, torture, and murder in the plantation South may appear over the top. While there appears to be no historical evidence for "Mandingo fighting" on American plantations, the Mandingo myth concatenates several repressed realities of chattel slavery: slaveholder awareness, in some contexts, of black ethnicity; slaveholder attempts to bring principles of animal husbandry to bear on human chattel; and the sheer sadistic pleasure to be taken in enslavement, over and above its legal and religious routinization and economic rationalization. The myth of the Mandingo slave fighter condenses and diffracts for popular enjoyment these complex and contradictory histories, which had their postslavery sequel in such diverging genres as pornography, eugenics, and folklore. As the film *Mandingo* circulated globally as a Hollywood major studio production, it was clear that the language of "fictive ethnicity" it disseminated was read out of an "American grammar book."<sup>32</sup> By evoking Hortense Spiller's influential framework, I mean to follow Weheliye in pointing out how, through the novel and film, "Mandinka" ethnicity is captured and restaged as an American "born and bred" eugenic pornotropic fantasy of "Mandingo" black masculine strength, savagery, and

sexual virility. This reading depends upon our holding in tension two senses of “fictive ethnicity”: the violent construction of national civic identity around racial and ethnic exclusion, and, concomitantly, the construction of “real” ethnic types within the crucible of cinemas of national fantasy.

The use of fictive ethnicity (in this double sense) to produce Americanness on screen is even more vividly on display in Lars von Trier’s *Manderlay* (2005). Shot on a bare Danish sound stage with no attempt at period verisimilitude, *Manderlay* tells the story of the people of the Manderlay plantation who are still held in slavery seventy years after the emancipation proclamation. Grace (played by Bryce Dallas Howard), an idealistic young white woman, arrives at the plantation and tries to set things right by imposing freedom and democracy by force. Stumbling upon a secret book of laws left by Mam, the former slave mistress, Grace realizes the slave community has been divided into eight invidious categories of “Nigger.” The strong and handsome Timothy (Isaach de Bankolé) presents himself as proud African warrior, but is exposed, over the course of events, as a “pleasin’ Nigger,” able to put on whatever face his mistress would like to see. In a final *mise en abyme*, Mam’s secret book of law is revealed to have been written by one of the slaves themselves, Wilhelm (Danny Glover), in an attempt to preserve the status quo of the plantation in isolation from meddling “liberators” like Grace.

Because it explicitly counters the expected conventions of period drama and cinematic identification, I would term *Manderlay* an antisentimental representation of slave affect on screen. The “anti” is probably not controversial: *Manderlay* has been described as an “anti-American” film, both because of its director Lars von Trier’s vaunted hostility to the United States (a country he has infamously never visited), and because it has been taken, quite plausibly, as an allegory of the U.S. invasion, occupation, and attempted “freeing” of Iraq. Such allegorical

abuse of slave memory is certainly to be criticized: founding a critique of the Iraq war on a historical allegory of Northern “carpetbaggers” in the post-Civil War U.S. South is the height of ideological arrogance. My interest, however, lies neither in attacking nor defending von Trier’s politics, but in locating his avant-garde directorial tactics of audience estrangement within a speculative typology of fictive slave affect. If *Mandingo* stokes the pornotropic fantasy of the virile African warrior born and bred into slavery (one incited again in Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*, a pastiche of blaxploitation pornotroping), Wilderson points out how *Manderlay* disillusiones the viewer of even this cold comfort. The “proud” virility of Timothy is revealed to be just “pleasing” dissimulation, and the mastermind of this plantation nightmare turns out to be neither white oppression (Mam) nor white liberation (Grace), but the secret wizard Wilhelm who has decided, in a grotesque inversion of Rousseau, that his people must be forced to be unfree. It is a powerfully antisentimental film, in contrast to Steve McQueen’s *Twelve Years A Slave* (which seems by contrast, in its verisimilitude, method acting, and immersive spectacle, to bring screen sentimentalism to a certain apotheosis). The offensive typology of blackness offered up in Mam’s law seems to set up an impassable barrier to anything like an originary African ethnicity: any proud reclaiming of African origins is always already anticipated by a voracious pornotroping.

I discuss these two films in particular because they have been entered into the recent critical debate within black studies about slavery and its cinematic afterlives. In *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye offers a detailed and persuasive reading of *Mandingo*. Wilderson has been the critic to convincingly bring *Manderlay* to attention in black studies circles. Both critics employ these films to launch powerfully indictments of the social contract. Weheliye, however, resists readings of the afterlife of slavery as social death, and directs *Habeas Viscus* to show how the

state of “bare life” exception famously theorized by Agamben is insufficient to slave experience and post-slave memory. Part of his argument proceeds by way of offering up Spillers’s concept of pornotroping as a dangerous supplement to “bare life.”

As Weheliye notes, dwelling on the nuance of Spillers’s concept: “In pornotroping, the double rotation [Hayden] White identifies at the heart of the trope figures the remainder of law and violence linguistically, staging the simultaneous sexualization and brutalization of the (female) slave, yet—and this marks its complexity—it remains unclear whether the turn or deviation is toward violence or sexuality.”<sup>33</sup>

The pornotrope, Weheliye here argues, is radically unstable: at its limit it can be said to generate, through this “double rotation,” the counter-pornotrope as well (much as the fierce antisentimentality of a Baldwin, say, is established only on the basis of the writer’s powerful affinities for the sentimental mode himself). This ambivalence remains at the heart of the representational dilemma Weheliye wrestles with. Rather than humanize the slave, the general desire for the pornographic production of her image in states of intensity throws the humanity of the slave into abyssal doubt. This can be seen plainly in an early scene in *Mandingo* that immediately belies the myth of racial equivalence and gender complementarity suggested by the movie poster. In this scene, the slaveholder Hammond is introduced to the pleasures of sex with black female slaves by a friend who assures him that black women prefer white men to be violent with them. When Hammond asks Ellen and is informed that, to the contrary, she prefers rape not to include blows and bruises, he proceeds in his rape of her without them. The scene reveals how pornotroping throws Ellen’s humanity into radical incoherence. Only more dehumanizing than the slave who agrees that rape is violent—and insists it be enacted as such—is the slave who agrees to participate in a fantasy of consensual seduction.<sup>34</sup> Pornotroping in

*Mandingo* thus stages what Christina Sharpe has aptly termed a “monstrous intimacy,” an inhuman relation that is produced out of acts of intimacy, care, and passion.<sup>35</sup>

Is there ever any exit from the double rotation of the pornotrope? Weheliye suggests that there is. His reading of *Mandingo* shows that the pornotroping, in its rendering violence and sexuality indistinguishable, indifferently captures both male and female flesh alike in its zones of depravity. Slaveholders in *Mandingo* crave male and female slave flesh equally, if not in the same way. *Manderlay*, by comparison, works the reversal of the pornotrope through “Mam’s law,” a law whose coldness and cruelty un genders black flesh by assigning black subjects to a typology of (un)natural kinds that are more aligned to the *persona ficta* of the law of ethnicity than to any law of sexual difference. Pornotropes like “Mandingo fighter” or “pleasin<apos> Nigger” thus present a question that this chapter is also preoccupied with: “How does the historical question of violent political domination activate a surplus and excess of sexuality that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality?”<sup>36</sup> Can fictive ethnicity be conceptualized as part of that surplus and excess, not the “real” or authentic original identity of the slave before her violent deracination, but something like its unexpected remainder? This remainder would come not in spite of, but *through* the radical ungendering of flesh Spillers point to.

For Weheliye, “racial assemblage” is a theoretical concept that helps prise open this question. His attention to the assemblage, *agencement*, or fabrication of race in and through the cinematic apparatus, returns us again to the theory of fictive ethnicity mobilized by Hall and Balibar, but with a critical difference I aim to mark through the idea of *habeas ficta* desiring production as another subversion of the law.

In “New Ethnicities,” Hall writes: “What is involved is *the splitting of the notion of ethnicity* between, on the one hand, the dominant notion which connects it to nation and “race,”

and on the other hand what I think is the beginning of *a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery*. That is to say, a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as ‘ethnic artists’ or film-makers.”<sup>37</sup> I want to linger briefly in this split notion of ethnicity that Hall produces, rather than rushing, as he does, to fill it in with a “positive conception” from the margins. Between the fictive ethnicity of nationalism and xenophobia and the “recognition that we all speak from a particular place,” I am suggesting, Hall points to an originary split in the concept of ethnicity that renders it constitutively *ambivalent*. Both positive *and* negative, ethnicity cannot be recuperated for an affirmative politics of recognition (which Hall himself appears to confirm when, after gesturing towards an ethnicity of the margins, he redoubles upon his guiding assertion that such a positionality cannot possibly contain the artist qua ethnic.) Ambivalence, however, also opens out the agonistic space of reversal that this chapter has been insisting upon, against the theoretical overdetermination of blackness as lack.

The split of ambivalence within the concept of ethnicity *before* it gets mobilized in representation is crucial to my account, and it is here that Weheliye’s racial assemblage theory helps us forward. Weheliye’s analytic prevents us from falling back upon any common sense image of “real ethnicities” as providing the basis for thinking the multiplicity of Africa and its diaspora (“real” ethnicity presenting, among other hazards, the lethal hazard of “ethnic conflict” when it finds political instrumentalization in various locations in contemporary Africa).<sup>38</sup> Speaking indirectly to the question of who has the “right to represent” slavery and its afterlives, Weheliye registers an important caution against reifying ethnicity: “Given that peoplehood represents the foremost mode of imagining, (re)producing, and legislating community, and this

managing inequality in the intertwined histories of capitalism and the nation-state, *peoplehood sneaks in as the de facto actualization of diasporas in the national context, especially when we avoid specifying how black collectivity might be codified in the absence of this category*. Thus, in the parlance of comparison, diasporic populations appear as real objects instead of objects of knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> In this quote Weheliye underscores how his concept of racial assemblage is emphatically *not* the grouping together of a series of discrete, empirical nationalities and ethnicities into a collectivity known as “Africa and its diaspora.” No matter how far into the margins of representation one goes, no matter how deep into the history and prehistory of racial capitalism, one never arrives at any retrievable “positive conception” of ethnicity from which to posit a pure lineage, freed of ambivalence. And yet, African ethnicity as an “object of knowledge” is perfectly attainable: it is retrieved, I have sought to show in this essay, through the diphasic onset of diasporic memory. The emergence of new ethnicities, insofar as such fictions continue to operate within Weheliye’s formulation, cannot be as empirical phenomena: they must instead arise out of an agonistic and “particular mode of knowledge production.”

Weheliye’s own reading of slaves on screen, principally of *Mandingo* and *Sankofa* (1993, dir. Haile Gerima), proceeds along this protocol. Building upon Spillers’s theorization of a split between the body and the flesh in the Middle Passage into slavery, Weheliye presents a contrast between a cinema of restored bodily plenitude (*Sankofa*) and a cinema of depraved violation of the flesh (*Mandingo*). *Mandingo* makes plain what *Sankofa* cannot: that the figure of bodily integrity is itself an ideology of Western humanism. In pursuit of a model of fleshly living otherwise, Weheliye instead takes black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter as his guide through the abyss of racial pornotroping and “beyond the word of Man.”<sup>40</sup> As I have tried to show, however cursorily, *Manderlay* is a quite different film from either *Mandingo* or *Sankofa*. In *Manderlay*,

any empiricist conception of ethno-racialized knowledge is thrown into chaos by the impossibility of exiting the law of slavery, even in conditions of travestied freedom, as the film disallows the horrors of slavery from congealing into a redemptive or pornographic tableau. In its minimal staging and theatrical deconstruction, it traverses the fantasy of immersive historical spectacle (an immersive verisimilitude that Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave*, for instance, still strives for). And yet *Manderlay* still presents abstractly what *Mandingo* exploits viscerally: how violent white craving for black flesh un genders *and* differentiates blackness. This "and" is important, insofar as some readings of Spillers have concluded (quite unpsychoanalytically) that her account of the violent ungendering of flesh somehow obviates the need to account for sexual difference. The absurd taxonomy of Mam's law, upon which the freed people erect a folklore of fictive ethnicities that they are never too concerned to be consistent about, suggests otherwise.

While the antisentimental *Manderlay* can unveil the inhuman mechanism of the law of slavery as the basis for the *personae ficta* of slave ethnicity, it cannot, however, release the kind of utopian affect that a true counter to the pornotropic would provide a glimpse of. For that, we will have to turn from cinema and look elsewhere in our screen cultures.

#### Afrofabulation and the *Mandingo* Pornotrope

If black ethnicity, as I have argued, is not a new problem in the representation of slaves on screen, but has always been an affective and effective part of the cinematic apparatus of motion capture, then can such ethnic tropes be used to render that apparatus inoperative? This question leads beyond the scope of this chapter, but a final case might illuminate the counter-pornotropic terrain that such a speculative question opens up. This case (ongoing as of this writing) has been most thoroughly reported and interpreted by Steven Thrasher, on whose work I

rely in what follows.<sup>41</sup> It concerns Michael Johnson, a black, HIV-positive college wrestling star who ran afoul of harsh Missouri laws that criminalize the failure to disclose one's HIV status to a partner before mutually engaging in consensual unprotected sex. Thrasher's impassioned reporting, which I can do no more than inadequately summarize here, powerfully counters the racist and homophobic image of Johnson as a predatory monster that continues to circulate in both mainstream and social media. That Johnson has been largely known in both of these contexts by the nickname "Tiger Mandingo" places his story within the fraught genealogy of fictive slave ethnicity and pornotroping that I have sought to delineate in this chapter.

Suggested to Johnson by a friend on the vogue ballroom scene (in which Johnson participated in the "butch queen" category), the name "Tiger Mandingo" clearly positions the images of Johnson that circulate on the TV and computer screens of our postcinematic era within the iconography of the Mandingo slave. The fictive flesh of the Mandingo slave trope structured how others saw Johnson, and how he showed himself to others, across a range of intimate and public settings. Interviewed by Thrasher, Johnson professed ignorance of the actual film, but was well aware of its place in the racial-historical schema, telling Thrasher "there was a brave black slave fighter, he's got the title of Mandingo . . . nothing negative about it . . . . I know what it means to me—a black slave that's a fighter. I consider myself a fighter."<sup>42</sup>

Johnson's response to Thrasher circles around a formulation he never explicitly arrives at: "I consider myself a slave." In his response to Thrasher, Johnson "lingers in the hold," as Wilderson might put it, in order to locate a performative response to the slave fighter image he is captivated by. After Muñoz, we can say that Johnson's act of *habeas ficta* effectively *disidentifies* with the "title" of the Mandingo slave. Muñoz describes the act of disidentifying as follows: "Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification,

assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries *to transform a cultural logic from within*, always struggling to enact a permanent social change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”<sup>43</sup> Johnson’s claiming of “Tiger Mandingo” as a screen name on multiple social media sites, I argue, was such a strategy of struggle “on and against” the terms of his ontological capture. It was a counter-pornotropic production of fictional flesh: a twisting of the tropes of black hypersexuality and depravation towards the fantasy and enactment of another way of life.

Such a claim for the disidentificatory power of the counter-pornotropic might be dismissed as endowing too much political significance to Johnson’s actions and statements. Alternatively, my argument might be criticized for ignoring the context within which Johnson made those statements to Thrasher: from inside the bars of a prison cage. I am under no illusions that his performative transvaluing of the fictive ethnicity of the Mandingo fighter had any immediate effect on his criminalization or that of others caught in the dragnet of the state’s ongoing war against poor black people. To the contrary, understanding him as disidentifying with a fictive slave ethnicity can surface elements in his testimony that a hostile or dismissive reading would miss, opening out an encounter between the tight space of his incarceration and the “true memory” of a different mode of existence.

Consider, in this respect, Johnson’s deliberate crosscutting of the vocabulary of contemporary sports (modern day gladiator games?) with the afterlives of slavery. In claiming that “Mandingo” was not just an ethnicity or category of slave, but a “title” won by a “brave fighter,” Johnson performed an act of *afrofabulation*: he drew out from the past a myth whose performative power was *larger* than its historical truth or falsity. In accepting his friend’s sly

designation of him as a “Mandingo,” Johnson transformed its meaning *within* the terms of black male pornotroping. Keeping the trope of the “big black buck” in continuous double rotation permitted him “to fully inhabit the flesh,” and point towards “a different modality of existence.”<sup>44</sup>

What such a counter-pornotroping of the fictive ethnicity and affectivity of the slave on screen can teach us is the unexpected ways in which history continues to *matter*; the way it continues to hurt, certainly, but also to bind up that hurt in a healing that may leave us, not so much whole, as *wholly other* than who we were. Such a binding may sometimes be as simple as the sympathetic, three-dimensional portrayal of Johnson we receive in Thrasher’s humane reporting, in contrast to the alarmist moral panic that prevailed elsewhere in coverage of his story. Certainly, it can be nothing less. Such fact-finding work, where it can contest the homophobic and antiblack terms under which black people currently appear as empirically knowable objects of knowledge under present ideology, is itself an instance of “the future in the present.”<sup>45</sup> It suggests to me the insufficiency of any politics, or postpolitics, that strives to force a choice between antagonism and agonism: we will never know in advance which situation we are in.

One can only remain haunted by Johnson’s fabulation of a lineage of brave slave fighters for whom ethnicity is not inherited but claimed and won. At stake in this affective image of this *persona ficta* are the prospects of freedom from the conditions of ontological capture in which Johnson, and persons like him, will stand always already accused and convicted. That such a freedom is literally unimaginable to our present condition does not negate but to the contrary underscores the value of such instances of afrofabulation.

## <h1>Notes

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<nt><sup>1</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> On the pornotropic, my thinking is indebted to Alex Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Fred Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape: Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,” *Women and Performance* 17, no. 2 (2007): 234. My emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 2011); Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996); Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Kelley L. Carter, “The Rise of the Black British Actor in America,” *Buzzfeed News*, January 5, 2015, accessed February 2, 2015, [www.buzzfeed.com/kelleylcarter/the-rise-of-the-black-british-actor-in-america](http://www.buzzfeed.com/kelleylcarter/the-rise-of-the-black-british-actor-in-america).

<sup>7</sup> Two recent texts powerfully demonstrate the necessity and insufficiency of a “skin deep” analysis of race: Nicole Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Michelle Stephens’s *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

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<sup>8</sup> Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> David Marriott, “Waiting to Fall,” *New Centennial Review* 13, no. 3 (2013): 176.

<sup>10</sup> “Beneath the body schema I had created a historical-racial schema. The data I used were provided not by ‘remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, or visual nature,’ but by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.” Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 2008): 91. The interior quote is from Jean Lhermitte, *L’image de notre corps* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1939): 17.

<sup>11</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Copjec, “The Sexual Compact,” *Angelaki* 17, no. 2 (2012): 37.

<sup>13</sup> Marriott, “Waiting to Fall,” 164–65.

<sup>14</sup> In 1989, Stuart Hall influentially posed this as the task of bringing into play “the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects”; Hall, “New Ethnicities,” 443.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, “New Ethnicities,” 449.

<sup>16</sup> Hall, “New Ethnicities,” 443.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, “New Ethnicities,” 444. My emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> Balibar, *Race, Nation, Class*, 96. The *persona ficta* of ethnic-national belonging, as an institutional fabrication, can also be thought of as an *agencement* or assemblage in the Deleuzian sense.

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<sup>19</sup> Balibar, *Race, Nation, Class*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Keeling, *Witch's Flight*, 148, 143.

<sup>21</sup> Keeling, *Witch's Flight*, 152.

<sup>22</sup> See especially the “Fantasy in the Hold” section by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Kelso, “The Intense Space(s) of Gilles Deleuze,” in *The Force of the Virtual Deleuze, Science, and Philosophy*, ed. Peter Gaffney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 124; Peter Gaffney, “Superposing Images: Deleuze and the Virtual after Bergson’s Critique of Science,” in *The Force of the Virtual Deleuze, Science, and Philosophy*, ed. Peter Gaffney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 98.

<sup>25</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin*. For more on “tense muscles,” see Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Nathan Widder, *Political Theory after Deleuze* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> The four modes (really two modes and their corresponding antitheses) can be defined in terms provided by James Baldwin, on the one hand (the critique of the sentimental), and Hortense Spillers, on the other (the critique of the pornotropic).

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<sup>29</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 111. I also am indebted to the reading of *Manderlay* in Frank Wilderson's lecture, "The Lady with the Whip: Gendered Violence and Social Death in *Manderlay* and *Django Unchained*," given at the Barnard Center for Research on Women, March 6, 2013. The published text of this lecture was not available at the time this chapter went to press.

<sup>30</sup> For more discussion of the fraught history of accusations of cannibalism in the history of slavery and the slave trade, see Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays in American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*.

<sup>33</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Here I am thinking of Saidiya Hartman's work on the "ruse of seduction"; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 91.

<sup>37</sup> Hall, "New Ethnicities," 447. My emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> It is thus relevant to my argument that Weheliye shares my interest in staging an encounter between Balibar (here, his collaborative work with Louis Althusser in *Reading Capital*) and Spillers. He notes, "For Althusser, Balibar, and Spillers *there exists no real object without the vehicular aid of particular modes of knowledge production.*" Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 18.

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<sup>39</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant the New Discourse of the Antilles,” *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (1989): 637–48.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Thrasher, “How College Wrestling Star ‘Tiger Mandingo’ Became a HIV Scapegoat,” *Buzzfeed LGBT*, July 7, 2014, accessed January 6, 2015 [www.buzzfeed.com/steventhrasher/how-college-wrestling-star-tiger-mandingo-became-an-hiv-scap](http://www.buzzfeed.com/steventhrasher/how-college-wrestling-star-tiger-mandingo-became-an-hiv-scap).

<sup>42</sup> Thrasher, “Tiger Mandingo.”

<sup>43</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11–12. My emphasis.

<sup>44</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 112.

<sup>45</sup> In addition to pointing out the counter-productive nature of the laws under which Johnson was charged, the absence of free condoms on his college campus (even after the HIV scare), the double standard of holding only one party to an act of consensual unprotected sex responsible for HIV safety, Thrasher goes on to paint an evocative picture of a world in which, as one informant says, “Everyone wanted a piece of [Johnson], until he had HIV”; Thrasher, “Tiger Mandingo.”