

WHEN I WAS a young student at Columbia University in New York there was a Black woman who used to stand outside the gate and yell at Whites, Latinos, and East and South Asian students, staff, and faculty as they entered the university. She accused them of having stolen her sofa and of selling her into slavery. She always winked at the Blacks, though we didn't wink back. Some of us thought her outbursts bigoted and out of step with the burgeoning ethos of multiculturalism and "rainbow coalitions." But others did not wink back because we were too fearful of the possibility that her isolation would become our isolation, and we had come to Columbia for the precise, though largely assumed and unspoken, purpose of foreclosing on that peril. Besides, people said she was crazy. Later, when I attended the University of California at Berkeley, I saw a Native American man sitting on the sidewalk of Telegraph Avenue. On the ground in front of him was an upside-down hat and a sign informing pedestrians that here they could settle the "Land Lease Accounts" that they had neglected to settle all of their lives. He, too, was "crazy."

Leaving aside for the moment their state of mind, it would seem that the structure, that is to say the rebar, or better still the grammar of their demands—and, by extension, the grammar of their suffering—was indeed an ethical grammar. Perhaps it is the only ethical grammar available to modern politics and modernity writ large, for it draws our attention not to how space and time are used and abused by enfranchised and violently powerful interests, but to the violence that underwrites the modern world's capacity to think, act, and exist spatially and temporally. The violence that robbed her of her body and him of his land provided the stage on which other violent and consensual dramas could be enacted. Thus, they would have to be crazy, crazy enough to call not merely the actions of the world but the world itself to account, and to account for *them* no less! The woman at Columbia was not demanding to be a participant in an unethical network of distribution: she was not demanding a place within capital, a piece of the pie (the demand for her sofa notwithstanding). Rather, she was articulating a triangulation between two things. On the one hand was the loss of her body, the very dereliction of her corporeal integrity, what Hortense Spillers charts as the transition from being a being to becoming a “*being* for the captor,”¹ the drama of value (the stage on which surplus value is extracted from labor power through commodity production and sale). On the other was the corporeal integrity that, once ripped from her body, fortified and extended the corporeal integrity of everyone else on the street. She gave birth to the commodity and to the Human, yet she had neither subjectivity nor a sofa to show for it. In her eyes, the world—not its myriad discriminatory practices, but the world itself—was unethical. And yet, the world passes by her without the slightest inclination to stop and disabuse her of her claim. Instead, it calls her “crazy.” And to what does the world attribute the Native American man's insanity? “He's crazy if he thinks he's getting any money out of us”? Surely, that doesn't make him crazy. Rather it is simply an indication that he does not have a big enough gun.

What are we to make of a world that responds to the most lucid enunciation of ethics with violence? What are the foundational questions of the ethico-political? Why are these questions so scandalous that they are rarely posed politically, intellectually, and cinematically—unless they are posed obliquely and unconsciously, as if by accident? Give Turtle Island back to the “Savage.” Give life itself back to the Slave. Two simple sen-

tences, fourteen simple words, and the structure of U.S. (and perhaps global) antagonisms would be dismantled. An “ethical modernity” would no longer sound like an oxymoron. From there we could busy ourselves with important conflicts that have been promoted to the level of antagonisms, such as class struggle, gender conflict, and immigrants’ rights.

One cannot but wonder why questions that go to the heart of the ethico-political, questions of political ontology, are so unspeakable in intellectual meditations, political broadsides, and even socially and politically engaged feature films. Clearly they *can* be spoken, even a child could speak those lines, so they would pose no problem for a scholar, an activist, or a filmmaker. And yet, what is also clear—if the filmographies of socially and politically engaged directors, the archive of progressive scholars, and the plethora of left-wing broadsides are anything to go by—is that what can so easily be spoken is now (500 years and 250 million Settlers/Masters on) so ubiquitously unspoken that these two simple sentences, these fourteen words not only render their speaker “crazy” but become themselves impossible to imagine.

Soon it will be forty years since radical politics, left-leaning scholarship, and socially engaged feature films began to speak the unspeakable.² In the 1960s and early 1970s the questions asked by radical politics and scholarship were not *Should the United States be overthrown?* or even *Would it be overthrown?* but when and how—and, for some, what would come in its wake. Those steadfast in their conviction that there remained a discernable quantum of ethics in the United States writ large (and here I am speaking of everyone from Martin Luther King Jr. prior to his 1968 shift, to the Tom Hayden wing of Students for Democratic Society, to the Julian Bond and Marion Barry faction of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to Bobby Kennedy Democrats) were accountable, in their rhetorical machinations, to the paradigmatic zeitgeist of the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, and the Weather Underground. Radicals and progressives could deride, reject, or chastise armed struggle mercilessly and cavalierly with respect to tactics and the possibility of “success,” but they could not dismiss revolution-as-ethic because they could not make a convincing case—by way of a paradigmatic analysis—that the United States was an ethical formation and still hope to maintain credibility as radicals and progressives. Even Bobby Kennedy (as a U.S. attorney general) mused that the law and its enforcers had no

ethical standing in the presence of Blacks.³ One could (and many did) acknowledge America's strength and power. This seldom rose to the level of an ethical assessment, however, remaining instead an assessment of the "balance of forces." The political discourse of Blacks, and to a lesser extent Indians, circulated too widely to wed the United States and ethics credibly. The raw force of COINTELPRO put an end to this trajectory toward a possible hegemony of ethical accountability. Consequently, the power of Blackness and Redness to pose the question—and the power to pose the question is the greatest power of all—retreated as did White radicals and progressives who "retired" from the struggle. The question lies buried in the graves of young Black Panthers, AIM warriors, and Black Liberation Army soldiers, or in prison cells where so many of them have been rotting (some in solitary confinement) for ten, twenty, or thirty years, and at the gates of the academy where the "crazies" shout at passersby. Gone are not only the young and vibrant voices that effected a seismic shift on the political landscape, but also the intellectual protocols of inquiry, and with them a spate of feature films that became authorized, if not by an unabashed revolutionary polemic, then certainly by a revolutionary zeitgeist.

Is it still possible for a dream of unfettered ethics, a dream of the Settlement and the Slave estate's⁴ destruction, to manifest itself at the ethical core of cinematic discourse when this dream is no longer a constituent element of political discourse in the streets or of intellectual discourse in the academy? The answer is "no" in the sense that, as history has shown, what cannot be articulated as political discourse in the streets is doubly foreclosed on in screenplays and in scholarly prose, but "yes" in the sense that in even the most taciturn historical moments, such as ours, the grammar of Black and Red suffering breaks in on this foreclosure, albeit like the somatic compliance of hysterical symptoms—it registers in both cinema and scholarship as a symptom of awareness of the structural antagonisms. The election of President Barack Obama does not mitigate the claim that this is a taciturn historical moment. Neoliberalism with a Black face is neither the index of a revolutionary advance nor the end of anti-Blackness as a constituent element of U.S. antagonisms. If anything, the election of Obama enables a plethora of shaming discourses in response to revolutionary politics and "legitimizes" widespread disavowal of any notion that the United States itself, and not merely its policies and

practices, is unethical. Between 1967 and 1980, we could think cinematically and intellectually of Blackness and Redness as having the coherence of full-blown discourses. From 1980 to the present, however, Blackness and Redness manifest only in the rebar of cinematic and intellectual (political) discourse, that is, as unspoken grammars.

This grammar can be discerned in the cinematic strategies (lighting, camera angles, image composition, and acoustic design), even when the script labors for the spectator to imagine social turmoil through the rubric of conflict (i.e., a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved) as opposed to the rubric of antagonism (an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions). In other words, even when films narrate a story in which Blacks or Indians are beleaguered with problems that the script insists are conceptually coherent (usually having to do with poverty or the absence of “family values”), the nonnarrative, or cinematic, strategies of the film often disrupt this coherence by posing the irreconcilable questions of Red and Black political ontology—or nonontology. The grammar of antagonism breaks in on the mendacity of conflict.

Semiotics and linguistics teach us that when we speak, our grammar goes unspoken. Our grammar is assumed. It is the structure through which the labor of speech is possible.⁵ Likewise, the grammar of political ethics—the grammar of assumptions regarding the ontology of suffering—which underwrites film theory and political discourse (in this book, discourse elaborated in direct relation to radical action), and which underwrites cinematic speech (in this book, Red, White, and Black films from the mid-1960s to the present) is also unspoken. This notwithstanding, film theory, political discourse, and cinema assume an ontological grammar, a structure of suffering. And this structure of suffering crowds out others, regardless of the sentiment of the film or the spirit of unity mobilized by the political discourse in question. To put a finer point on it, structures of ontological suffering stand in antagonistic, rather than conflictual, relation to one another (despite the fact that antagonists themselves may not be aware of the ontological position from which they speak). Though this is perhaps the most controversial and out-of-step claim of this book, it is, nonetheless, the foundation of the close reading of feature films and political theory that follows.

The difficulty of writing a book which seeks to uncover Red, Black, and White socially engaged feature films as aesthetic accompaniments to grammars of suffering, predicated on the subject positions of the “Savage” and the Slave, is that today’s intellectual protocols are not informed by Fanon’s insistence that “ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man.”⁶ In sharp contrast to the late 1960s and early 1970s, we now live in a political, academic, and cinematic milieu which stresses “diversity,” “unity,” “civic participation,” “hybridity,” “access,” and “contribution.” The radical fringe of political discourse amounts to little more than a passionate dream of civic reform and social stability. The distance between the protester and the police has narrowed considerably. The effect of this on the academy is that intellectual protocols tend to privilege two of the three domains of subjectivity, namely preconscious interests (as evidenced in the work of social science around “political unity,” “social attitudes,” “civic participation,” and “diversity,”) and unconscious identification (as evidenced in the humanities’ postmodern regimes of “diversity,” “hybridity,” and “relative [rather than “master”] narratives”). Since the 1980s, intellectual protocols aligned with structural positionality (except in the work of die-hard Marxists) have been kicked to the curb. That is to say, it is hardly fashionable anymore to think the vagaries of power through the generic positions within a structure of power relations—such as man/woman, worker/boss. Instead, the academy’s ensembles of questions are fixated on specific and “unique” experiences of the myriad identities that make up those structural positions. This would be fine if the work led us back to a critique of the paradigm; but most of it does not. Again, the upshot of this is that the intellectual protocols now in play, and the composite effect of cinematic and political discourse since the 1980s, tend to hide rather than make explicit the grammar of suffering which underwrites the United States and its foundational antagonisms. This state of affairs exacerbates—or, more precisely, mystifies and veils—the ontological death of the Slave and the “Savage” because (as in the 1950s) the cinematic, political, and intellectual discourse of the current milieu resists being sanctioned and authorized by the irreconcilable demands of Indigenism and Blackness—academic enquiry is thus no more effective in pursuing a revolutionary critique than the legislative antics of the loyal opposition. This is how left-leaning scholars help civil

society recuperate and maintain stability. But this stability is a state of emergency for Indians and Blacks.

The aim of this book is to embark on a paradigmatic analysis of how dispossession is imagined at the intersection of (a) the most unflinching meditations (metacommentaries) on political economy and libidinal economy, (e.g., Marxism, as in the work of Antonio Negri, and psychoanalysis, as in the work of Kaja Silverman), (b) the discourse of political common sense, and (c) the narrative and formal strategies of socially or politically engaged films. In other words, a paradigmatic analysis asks, *What are the constituent elements of, and the assumptive logic regarding, dispossession which underwrite theoretical claims about political and libidinal economy; and how are those elements and assumptions manifest in both political common sense and in political cinema?*

Charles S. Maier argues that a metacommentary on political economy can be thought of as an “interrogation of economic doctrines to disclose their sociological and political premises. . . . in sum, [it] regards economic ideas and behavior not as frameworks for analysis, but as beliefs and actions that must themselves be explained.”⁷

Jared Sexton describes libidinal economy as “the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious.” Needless to say, libidinal economy functions variously across scales and is as “objective” as political economy. It is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption. Sexton emphasizes that it is “the whole structure of psychic and emotional life,” something more than, but inclusive of or traversed by, what Antonio Gramsci and other Marxists call a “structure of feeling”; it is “a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious fixation.”⁸

This book interrogates the assumptive logic of metacommentaries on political and libidinal economy, and their articulations in film, through a subject whose structure of dispossession (the constituent elements of his or her loss and suffering) they cannot theorize: the Black, a subject who is always already positioned as Slave. The implications of my interrogation reach far beyond film studies, for these metacommentaries not only have the status of paradigmatic analyses, but their reasoning and assumptions

permeate the private and quotidian of political common sense and buttress organizing and activism on the left.

In leftist metacommentaries on ontology (and in the political common sense and the radical cinema in *fee*, however unintentionally, to such metacommentaries), subjects' paradigmatic location, the structure of their relationality, is organized around their capacities: powers subjects have or lack, the constituent elements of subjects' structural position with which they are imbued or lack prior to the subjects' performance. Just as prior to a game of chess, the board and the pieces on it live in a network of antagonisms. The spatial and temporal capacities of the queen (where she is located and where she can move, as well as how she can move) articulate an irreconcilable asymmetry of power between her and a rook or a pawn, for example. Vest the rook with the powers of the queen (before the game begins, of course) and it is not the outcome of the game that is in jeopardy so much as the integrity of the paradigm itself—it is no longer chess but something else. And it goes without saying that no piece may leave the board if it is to stand in any relation whatsoever to its contemporaries (asymmetry aside); this would be tantamount to leaving the world, to death. Power relations are extant in the sinews of capacity. For Marxists, the revolutionary objective is not to play the game but to destroy it, to end exploitation and alienation. They see the capacity to accumulate surplus value embodied in one piece, the capitalist, and the embodiment of dispossession as being manifest in the worker. But the worker's essential incapacity (powers which cannot accrue to the worker, suffering as exploitation and alienation) is the essence of capacity, life itself, when looked at through the eyes of the Slave.

Socially or politically engaged films pride themselves on their proclivity to embrace what the Left views as the essence of dispossession: the plight of the exploited and alienated worker. Throughout this book, I argue that as radical and iconoclastic as so many socially or politically engaged films are (and they are indeed a breath of fresh air compared to standard Hollywood fare), in their putative embrace of working-class incapacity there is also, from the standpoint of the Slave, a devastating embrace of Human capacity—that which the Slave lacks. In other words, the narrative strategies of films that articulate the suffering of the worker are shot through with obstinate refusals to surrender their cinematic

embrace to the structure of the Slave's domination, something infinitely more severe than exploitation and alienation.

I have little interest in assailing political conservatives. Nor is my argument wedded to the disciplinary needs of political science, or even sociology, where injury must be established, first, as White supremacist event, from which one then embarks on a demonstration of intent, or racism; and, if one is lucky, or foolish, enough, a solution is proposed. If the position of the Black is, as I argue, a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere, indeed, in the world, in other words, if a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject, as imagined by Marxism and psychoanalysis, then his or her paradigmatic exile is not simply a function of repressive practices on the part of institutions (as political science and sociology would have it). This banishment from the Human fold is to be found most profoundly in the emancipatory meditations of Black people's staunchest "allies," and in some of the most "radical" films. Here—not in restrictive policy, unjust legislation, police brutality, or conservative scholarship—is where the Settler/Master's sinews are most resilient.

The polemic animating this research stems from (1) my reading of Native and Black American metacommentaries on Indian and Black subject positions written over the past twenty-three years and (2) a sense of how much that work appears out of joint with intellectual protocols and political ethics which underwrite political praxis and socially engaged popular cinema in this epoch of multiculturalism and globalization. The sense of abandonment I experience when I read the metacommentaries on Red positionality (by theorists such as Leslie Silko, Ward Churchill, Taiaiake Alfred, Vine Deloria Jr., and Haunani-Kay Trask) and the metacommentaries on Black positionality (by theorists such as David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Ronald Judy, Hortense Spillers, Orlando Patterson, and Achille Mbembe) against the deluge of multicultural positivity is overwhelming. One suddenly realizes that, though the semantic field on which subjectivity is imagined has expanded phenomenally through the protocols of multiculturalism and globalization theory, Blackness and an unflinching articulation of Redness are more unimaginable and illegible within this expanded semantic field than they were during the height of the FBI's repressive Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). On the semantic field on which the new protocols are possible, Indigenism can indeed

become partially legible through a programmatic of structural adjustment (as fits our globalized era). In other words, for the Indians' subject position to be legible, their *positive* registers of lost or threatened cultural identity must be foregrounded, when in point of fact the antagonistic register of dispossession that Indians "possess" is a position in relation to a socius structured by genocide. As Churchill points out, everyone from Armenians to Jews have been subjected to genocide, but the Indigenous position is one for which genocide is a constitutive element, not merely an historical event, without which Indians would not, paradoxically, "exist."⁹

Regarding the Black position, some might ask why, after claims successfully made on the state by the Civil Rights Movement, do I insist on positing an operational analytic for cinema, film studies, and political theory that appears to be a dichotomous and essentialist pairing of Masters and Slaves? In other words, why should we think of today's Blacks in the United States as Slaves and everyone else (with the exception of Indians) as Masters? One could answer these questions by demonstrating how nothing remotely approaching claims successfully made on the state has come to pass. In other words, the election of a Black president aside, police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life. But such empirically based rejoinders would lead us in the wrong direction; we would find ourselves on "solid" ground, which would only mystify, rather than clarify, the question. We would be forced to appeal to "facts," the "historical record," and empirical markers of stasis and change, all of which could be turned on their head with more of the same. Underlying such a downward spiral into sociology, political science, history, and public policy debates would be the very rubric that I am calling into question: the grammar of suffering known as exploitation and alienation, the assumptive logic whereby subjective dispossession is arrived at in the calculations between those who sell labor power and those who acquire it. The Black qua the worker. Orlando Patterson has already dispelled this faulty ontological grammar in *Slavery and Social Death*, where he demonstrates how and why work, or forced labor, is not a constituent element of slavery. Once the "solid" plank of "work" is removed from slavery, then the conceptually coherent notion of "claims

against the state”—the proposition that the state and civil society are elastic enough to even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position—disintegrates into thin air. The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage. Put another way, No slave, no world. And, in addition, as Patterson argues, no slave is *in* the world.

If, as an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity; if the Slave is, to borrow from Patterson, generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized, a being outside of relationality, then our analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in struggles with the state and civil society, not unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is of the world. The onus is not on one who posits the Master/Slave dichotomy but on the one who argues there is a distinction between Slaveness and Blackness. How, when, and where did such a split occur? The woman at the gates of Columbia University awaits an answer.

In “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” James Baldwin wrote about “the terrible gap between [Norman Mailer’s] life and my own.” It is a painful essay in which Baldwin explains how he experienced, through beginning and ending his “friendship” with Mailer, those moments when Blackness inspires White emancipatory dreams and how it feels to suddenly realize the impossibility of the inverse: “The really ghastly thing about trying to convey to a white man the reality of the Negro experience has nothing whatever to do with the fact of color, but has to do with this man’s relationship to his own life. He will face in your life only what he is willing to face in his.” His long Paris nights with Mailer bore fruit only to the extent that Mailer was able to say, “Me, too.” Beyond that was the void which Baldwin carried with him into and, subsequently, out of the “friendship.” Baldwin’s condemnation of discourses that utilize exploitation and alienation’s grammar of suffering is unflinching: “I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream, unflinching and unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives.”¹⁰ He is writing about the encounters between

Blacks and Whites in Paris and New York in the 1950s, but he may as well be writing about the eighteenth-century encounters between Slaves and the rhetoric of new republics like revolutionary France and America.¹¹

Early in the essay, Baldwin puts his finger on the nature of the impasse which allows the Black to catalyze White-to-White thought, without risking a White-to-Black encounter: “There is a difference,” he writes, “between Norman and myself in that I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose.”¹² It is not a lack of goodwill or the practice of rhetorical discrimination, nor is it *essentially* the imperatives of the profit motive that prevent the hyperbolic circulation of Blackness from cracking and destabilizing civil society’s ontological structure of empathy—even as it cracks and destabilizes “previously accepted categories of thought about politics.”¹³ The key to this structural prohibition barring Blackness from the conceptual framework of Human empathy can be located in the symbolic value of that “something to save” which Baldwin saw in Mailer. It was not until 1967–68, with such books as *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*—after he had exhausted himself with *The Fire Next Time*—that Baldwin permitted himself to give up hope and face squarely that the Master/Slave relation itself was the essence of that “something to save.”

Toward the end of the first volume of *Capital*—after informing us “that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part in the methods of primitive accumulation” (e.g., methods which produce the Slave)—Karl Marx makes a humorous but revealing observation about the psychic disposition of the proletariat. In drawing a distinction between the worker and the Slave, Marx points out that the Slave has no wage, no symbolic stand-in for an exchange of labor power. The worker, in contrast, has cash, though not much of it. Here Marx does not comment so much on the not-much-of-it-ness of the worker’s chump change, but on the enormous ensemble of cathected investments that such a little bit of change provides: “[It] remains in his mind as something more than a particular use-value. . . . [For] it is the worker himself who converts the money into whatever use-values he desires; it is he who buys commodities as he wishes and, as the *owner of money*, as the buyer of goods, *he stands in precisely the same relationship to the sellers of goods as any other buyer.*”¹⁴

Marx goes on to tell us that whether the worker saves, hoards, or squanders his money on drink, he “acts as a free agent” and so “learns to control himself, in contrast to the slave, who needs a master.”¹⁵ It is sad, in a funny sort of way, to think of a worker standing in the same relationship to the sellers of goods as any other buyer, simply because his use-values can buy a loaf of bread just like the capitalist’s capital can. But it is frightening to take this “same relationship” in a direction that Marx does not take it: If workers can buy a loaf of bread, they can also buy a slave. It seems to me that the psychic dimension of a proletariat who “stands in precisely the same relationship” to other members of civil society due to their intramural exchange in mutual, possessive possibilities, the ability to own either a piece of Black flesh or a loaf of white bread or both, is where we must begin to understand the founding antagonism between the something Mailer has to save and the nothing Baldwin has to lose.

David Eltis is emphatic in his assertion that European civil society’s decision *not* to hunt for slaves along the banks of the Thames or other rivers in the lands of White people or in prisons or poor houses was a bad business decision that slowed the pace of economic development in both Europe and the “New World.” Eltis writes: “No Western European power after the Middle Ages crosses the basic divide separating European workers from full chattel slavery. And while serfdom fell and rose in different parts of early modern Europe and shared characteristics with slavery, serfs were not outsiders either before or after enserfment. The phrase ‘long distance serf trade’ is an oxymoron.”¹⁶

He goes on to show how population growth patterns in Europe during the 1300s, 1400s, and 1500s far outpaced population growth patterns in Africa. He makes this point not only to demonstrate how devastating chattel slavery was on African population growth patterns—in other words, to highlight its genocidal impact—but also to make an equally profound but commonly overlooked point: Europe was so heavily populated that had the Europeans been more invested in the economic value of chattel slavery than they were in the symbolic value of Black slavery and hence had instituted “a properly exploited system drawing on convicts, prisoners and vagrants. . . . [they] could easily have provided 50,000 [White slaves] a year [to the New World] without serious disruption to

either international peace or the existing social institutions that generated and supervised these potential European victims.”¹⁷

I raise Eltis’s counterposing of the symbolic value of slavery to the economic value of slavery in order to debunk two gross misunderstandings: One is that work—or alienation and exploitation—is a constituent element of slavery. Slavery, writes Orlando Patterson, “*is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons.*”¹⁸ Patterson goes to great lengths to delink his three “constituent elements of slavery” from the labor that one is typically forced to perform when one is enslaved. Forced labor is not constitutive of enslavement because whereas it explains a common practice, it does not define the structure of the power relation between those who are slaves and those who are not. In pursuit of his “constituent elements” of slavery, a line of inquiry that helps us separate experience (events) from ontology (the capacities of power—or lack thereof—lodged in distinct and irreconcilable subject positions, e.g., Humans and Slaves), Patterson helps us denaturalize the link between force and labor so that we can theorize the former as a phenomenon that positions a body, ontologically (paradigmatically), and the latter as a possible but not inevitable experience of someone who is socially dead.¹⁹

The other misunderstanding I am attempting to correct is the notion that the profit motive is the consideration in the slaveocracy that trumps all others. David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Ronald Judy, Hortense Spillers, Orlando Patterson, and Achille Mbembe have gone to considerable lengths to show that, in point of fact, slavery is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness; and that the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but accumulation and fungibility (as Hartman puts it):²⁰ the condition of being owned and traded. Patterson reminds us that though professional athletes and brides in traditional cultures can be said to be bought and sold (when the former is traded among teams and the latter is exchanged for a bride price), they are not slaves because (1) they are not “generally dishonored,” meaning they are not stigmatized in their being *prior to any transgressive act or behavior*; (2) they are not “natively alienated,” meaning their claims to ascending and descending generations are not denied them; and (3) they have some choice in the relationship, meaning they are not the objects of “naked violence.” The relational status of the athlete and the traditional bride is always already recognized

and incorporated into relationality writ large. Unlike the Slave, the professional athlete and traditional bride are subjected to accumulation and fungibility as one experience among many experiences, and not as their ontological foundation.

Eltis meticulously explains how the costs of enslavement would have been driven down exponentially had Europeans taken White slaves directly to America rather than sailing from Europe to Africa to take Black slaves to America. He notes that “shipping costs . . . comprised by far the greater part of the price of any form of imported bonded labor in the Americas. If we take into account the time spent collecting a slave cargo on the African coast as well, then the case for sailing directly from Europe with a cargo of [Whites] appears stronger again.” Eltis sums up his data by concluding that if European merchants, planters, and statesmen imposed chattel slavery on some members of their own society—say, only 50,000 White slaves per year—then not only would European civil society have been able to absorb the social consequences of these losses (i.e., class warfare would have been unlikely even at this rate of enslavement), but civil society “would [also] have enjoyed lower labor costs, a faster development of the Americas, and higher exports and income levels on both sides of the Atlantic.”²¹

But what Whites would have gained in economic value, they would have lost in symbolic value; and it is the latter which structures the libidinal economy of civil society. White chattel slavery would have meant that the aura of the social contract had been completely stripped from the body of the convict, vagrant, beggar, indentured servant, or child. This is a subtle point but one vital to our understanding of the relationship between the world of Blacks and the world of Humans. Even under the most extreme forms of coercion in the late Middle Ages and in the early modern period—for example, the provisional and selective enslavement of English vagrants from the early to mid-1500s to the mid-1700s—“the power of the state over [convicts in the Old World] and the power of the master over [convicts in the New World] was more circumscribed than that of the slave owner over the slave.”²²

Marx himself takes note of the preconscious political—and, by implication, unconscious libidinal—costs to civil society, had European elites been willing to enslave Whites.²³ In fact, the antivagabond laws of King Edward VI (1547) proclaimed,

If anyone refuses to work, he shall be condemned as a slave to the person who has denounced him as an idler. The master shall feed his slave on bread and water, weak broth and such refuse meat as he thinks fit. He has the right to force him to do any work, no matter how disgusting, with whip and chains. If the slave is absent for a fortnight, he is condemned to slavery for life and is to be branded on the forehead or back with the letter S. . . . The master can sell him, bequeath him, let him out on hire as a slave, *just as he can any other personal chattel or cattle*. . . . All persons have the right to take away the children of the vagabonds and keep them as apprentices, the young men until they are 24, the girls until they are 20.²⁴

These laws were so controversial, even among elites, that they could never take hold as widespread social and economic phenomena. But I am more interested in the symbolic value of Whiteness (and the absence of Blackness's value), gleaned from a close reading of the laws themselves than I am in a historical account of the lived experience of the White poor's resistance to, or the White elite's ambivalence toward, such ordinances. The actual ordinance manifests the symptoms of its own internal resistance long before either parliament or the poor themselves mount external challenges to it.

Symptomatic of civil society's libidinal safety net is the above ordinance's repeated use of the word *if*: "If anyone refuses to work . . ." "If the slave is absent for a fortnight . . ." The violence of slavery is repeatedly checked, subdued into becoming a contingent violence for that entity which is beginning to call itself "White" at the very same moment that it is being ratcheted up to a gratuitous violence for that entity which is being called (by Whites) "Black." All the ordinances of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries which Marx either quotes at length or discusses are ordinances which seem, on their face, to debunk my claim that slavery for Whites was and is experiential and that for Blacks it was and is ontological. And yet all of these ordinances are riddled with contingencies, of which frequent and unfettered deployment of the conjunction *if* is emblematic.

Spillers and Eltis remind us that the archive of African slavery shows no internal recognition of the libidinal costs of turning human bodies into sentient flesh. From Marx's reports on proposed vagabond-into-slave

legislation, it becomes clear that the libidinal economy of such European legislation is far too unconsciously invested in “saving” the symbolic value of the very vagabonds such laws consciously seek to enslave. In other words, the law would rather shoot itself in the foot (i.e., sacrifice the economic development of the New World) than step into a subjective void where idlers and vagabonds might find themselves without contemporaries, with no relational status to save.

In this way, White-on-White violence is put in check (a) before it becomes gratuitous, or structural, before it can shred the fabric of civil society beyond mending; and (b) before conscious, predictable, and sometimes costly challenges are mounted against the legislation despite its dissembling lack of resolve. This is accomplished by the imposition of the numerous *on condition that* and *supposing that* clauses bound up in the word *if* and also by claims bound up in the language around the enslavement of European children: a White child may be enslaved *on condition that* she or he is the child of a vagabond, and then, only until the age of twenty or twenty four.

Spillers searched the archives for a similar kind of stop-gap language with respect to the African—some indication of the African’s human value in the libidinal economy of Little Baby Civil Society. She came up empty-handed: “Expecting to find direct and amplified reference to African women during the opening years of the Trade, the observer is disappointed time and again that this cultural subject is concealed beneath the overwhelming debris of the itemized account, between the lines of the massive logs of commercial enterprise [e.g., a ship’s cargo record] that overrun the sense of clarity we believed we had gained concerning this collective humiliation.”²⁵

It would be reassuring to say that Europeans rigorously debated the ethical implications of forcing the social death of slavery on Africans before they went ahead with it; but, as Marx, Eltis, and Spillers make abundantly clear, it would be more accurate simply to say that African slavery did not present an ethical dilemma for global civil society. The ethical dilemmas were unthought.

During the emergence of new ontological relations in the modern world, from the late Middle Ages through the 1500s, many different kinds of people experienced slavery. In other words, there have been times when natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence have turned

individuals of myriad ethnicities and races into beings who are socially dead. But *African*, or more precisely *Blackness*, refers to an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality. Thus modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race appears, people who, a priori, that is prior to the contingency of the “transgressive act” (such as losing a war or being convicted of a crime), stand as socially dead in relation to the rest of the world. This, I will argue, is as true for those who were herded onto the slave ships as it is for those who had no knowledge whatsoever of the coffles. In this period, chattel slavery, as a condition of ontology and not just as an event of experience, stuck to the African like Velcro. To the extent that we can think the essence of Whiteness and the essence of Blackness, we must think their essences through the structure of the Master/Slave relation. It should be clear by now that I am not only drawing a distinction between what is commonly thought of as the Master/Slave relation and the constituent elements of the Master/Slave relation,²⁶ but I am also drawing a distinction between the experience of slavery (which anyone can be subjected to) and the ontology of slavery, which in modernity (the years 1300 to the present) becomes the singular purview of the Black. In this period, slavery is *cathedralized*. It “advances” from a word which describes a condition that anyone can be subjected to, to a word which reconfigures the African body into Black flesh. Far from being merely the experience of the African, slavery is now the African’s access to (or, more correctly, banishment from) ontology.

In their own ways, Spillers, a Black woman and cultural historian, and Eltis, a White historian of the transatlantic slave trade, make the similar points. First, they claim that the pre-Columbian period, or the late Middle Ages (1300–1500), was a moment in which Europe, the Arab world, and Asia found themselves at an ontological crossroads in society’s ability to meditate on its own existence. Second, Spillers and Eltis ask whether the poor, convicts, vagrants, and beggars of any given society (French, German, Dutch, Arab, East Asian) should be condemned to a life of natal alienation. Should they have social death forced on them in lieu of real death (i.e., executions)? Should this form of chattel slavery be imposed on the internal poor, en masse—that is, should the scale of White slavery (to the extent that any one nation carried it out at all) become industrial?

And, most important, should the progeny of the White slave be enslaved as well?

It took some time for this argument to unfold. Eltis suggests the argument ensued—depending on the country—from 1200 to the mid-1400s (1413–23), and that, whereas it was easily and forthrightly settled in places like England and the Netherlands, in other countries like Portugal, parts of southern France, and parts of the Arab world, the question waxed and waned.

Again, what is important for us to glean from these historians is that the pre-Columbian period, the late Middle Ages, reveals no archive of debate on these three questions as they might be related to that massive group of black-skinned people south of the Sahara. Eltis suggests that there was indeed massive debate which ultimately led to Britain taking the lead in the abolition of slavery, but he reminds us that that debate did not have its roots in the late Middle Ages, the post-Columbian period of the 1500s or the Virginia colony period of the 1600s. It was, he asserts, an outgrowth of the mid- to late eighteenth-century emancipatory thrust—intra-Human disputes such as the French and American revolutions—that swept through Europe. But Eltis does not take his analysis further than this. Therefore, it is important that we not be swayed by his optimism about the Enlightenment and its subsequent abolitionist discourses. It is highly conceivable that the discourse that elaborates the justification for freeing the slave is not the product of the Human being having suddenly and miraculously recognized the slave. Rather, as Saidiya Hartman argues, emancipatory discourses present themselves to us as further evidence of the Slave's fungibility: "The figurative capacities of blackness enable white flights of fancy while increasing the likelihood of the captive's disappearance."²⁷ First, the questions of Humanism were elaborated in contradistinction to the human void, to the African *qua* chattel (the 1200s to the end of the 1600s). Second, as the presence of Black chattel in the midst of exploited and unexploited Humans (workers and bosses, respectively) became a fact of the world, exploited Humans (in the throes of class conflict with unexploited Humans) seized the image of the Slave as an enabling vehicle that animated the evolving discourses of their own emancipation, just as unexploited Humans had seized the flesh of the Slave to increase their profits.

Without this gratuitous violence, a violence that marks everyone experientially until the late Middle Ages when it starts to mark the Black ontologically, the so-called great emancipatory discourses of modernity—Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, sexual liberation, and the ecology movement—political discourses predicated on grammars of suffering and whose constituent elements are exploitation and alienation, might not have developed.²⁸ Chattel slavery did not simply reterritorialize the ontology of the African. It also created the Human out of culturally disparate entities from Europe to the East.

I am not suggesting that across the globe Humanism developed in the same way regardless of region or culture; what I am saying is that the late Middle Ages gave rise to an ontological category—an ensemble of common existential concerns—which made and continues to make possible both war and peace, conflict and resolution, between the disparate members of the human race, East and West. Senator Thomas Hart Benton intuited this notion of the existential commons when he wrote that though the “Yellow race” and its culture had been “torpid and stationary for thousands of years . . . [Whites and Asians] must talk together, and trade together, and marry together. Commerce is a great civilizer—social intercourse as great—and marriage greater.”²⁹ Eltis points out that as late as the seventeenth century, “prisoners taken in the course of European military action . . . could expect death if they were leaders, or banishment if they were deemed followers, but never enslavement. . . . Detention followed by prisoner exchanges or ransoming was common.” “By the seventeenth century, enslavement of fellow Europeans was beyond the limits” of Humanism’s existential commons, even in times of war.³⁰ Slave status “was reserved for non-Christians. Even the latter group however . . . had some prospect of release in exchange for Christians held by rulers of Algiers, Tunis, and other Mediterranean Muslim powers.”³¹ But though the practice of enslaving the vanquished was beyond the limit of wars among Western peoples and only practiced provisionally in East-West conflicts, the baseness of the option was not debated when it came to the African. The race of Humanism (White, Asian, South Asian, and Arab) could not have produced itself without the simultaneous production of that walking destruction which became known as the Black. Put another way, through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and

with these joys and struggles the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks.

In his essay “To ‘Corroborate Our Claims’: Public Positioning and the Slavery Metaphor in Revolutionary America,” Peter Dorsey (in his concurrence with the cultural historians F. Nwabueze Okoye and Patricia Bradley) suggests that in mid- to late eighteenth-century America Blackness was such a fungible commodity that it was traded as freely between the exploited (workers who did not “own” slaves) as it was between the unexploited (planters who did). This was due to the effective uses to which Whites could put the Slave as both flesh and metaphor. For the revolutionaries, “slavery represented a ‘nightmare’ that white Americans were trying to avoid.”³² Dorsey’s claim is provocative, but not unsupported: he maintains that had Blacks-as-Slaves not been in the White field of vision on a daily basis that it would have been virtually impossible for Whites to transform themselves from colonial subjects into revolutionaries:

Especially prominent in the rhetoric and reality of the [revolutionary] era, the concepts of freedom and slavery were applied to a wide variety of events and values and were constantly being defined and redefined. . . . Early understandings of American freedom were in many ways dependent on the existence of chattel slavery. . . . [We should] see slavery in revolutionary discourse, not merely as a hyperbolic rhetorical device but as a crucial and fluid [fungible] concept that had a major impact on the way early Americans thought about their political future. . . . The slavery metaphor destabilized previously accepted categories of thought about politics, race, and the early republic.³³

Though the idea of “taxation without representation” may have spoken concretely to the idiom of power that marked the British/American relation as being structurally unethical, it did not provide metaphors powerful and fungible enough for Whites to meditate and move on when resisting the structure of their own subordination at the hands of “unchecked political power.”³⁴

The most salient feature of Dorsey’s findings is not his understanding of the way Blackness, as a crucial and fungible conceptual possession of civil society, impacts and destabilizes previously accepted categories of intra-White thought. Most important, instead, is his contribution to the

evidence that, even when Blackness is deployed to stretch the elasticity of civil society to the point of civil war, that expansion is never elastic enough to embrace the very Black who catalyzed the expansion. In fact, Dorsey, building on Bradley's historical research, asserts that just the opposite is true. The more the political imagination of civil society is enabled by the fungibility of the slave metaphor, the less legible the condition of the slave becomes: "Focusing primarily on colonial newspapers . . . Bradley finds that the slavery metaphor 'served to distance the patriot agenda from the antislavery movement.' If anything, Bradley states, widespread use of the metaphor 'gave first evidence that the issue of real slavery was not to have a part in the revolutionary messages.'"³⁵ And Eltis believes that this philosophical incongruity between the image of the Slave and freedom for the Slave begins in Europe and predates the American Revolution by at least one hundred years: "The [European] countries least likely to enslave their own had the harshest and most sophisticated system of exploiting enslaved non-Europeans. Overall, the English and Dutch conception of the role of the individual in metropolitan society ensured the accelerated development of African chattel slavery in the Americas . . . because their own subjects could not become chattel slaves or even convicts for life."³⁶

Furthermore, the circulation of Blackness as metaphor and image at the most politically volatile and progressive moments in history (e.g., the French, English, and American revolutions) produces dreams of liberation which are more inessential to and more parasitic on the Black, and more emphatic in their guarantee of Black suffering, than any dream of human liberation in any era heretofore.

Black slavery is foundational to modern Humanism's ontics because "freedom" is the hub of Humanism's infinite conceptual trajectories. But these trajectories only appear to be infinite. They are finite in the sense that they are predicated on the idea of freedom from some contingency that can be named, or at least conceptualized. The contingent rider could be freedom from patriarchy, freedom from economic exploitation, freedom from political tyranny (e.g., taxation without representation), freedom from heteronormativity, and so on. What I am suggesting is that first political discourse recognizes freedom as a structuring ontologic and then it works to disavow this recognition by imagining freedom not through political ontology—where it rightfully began—but through political experience (and practice); whereupon it immediately loses its onto-

logical foundations. Why would anyone do this? Why would anyone start off with, quite literally, an earth-shattering ontologic and, in the process of meditating on it and acting through it, reduce it to an earth-reforming experience? Why do Humans take such pride in self-adjustment, in diminishing, rather than intensifying, the project of liberation (how did we get from 1968 to the present)? Because, I contend, in allowing the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status, one would have to lose one's Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die.

For the Black, freedom is an ontological, rather than experiential, question. There is no philosophically credible way to attach an experiential, a contingent, rider onto the notion of freedom when one considers the Black—such as freedom from gender or economic oppression, the kind of contingent riders rightfully placed on the non-Black when thinking freedom. Rather, the riders that one could place on Black freedom would be hyperbolic—though no less true—and ultimately untenable: freedom from the world, freedom from Humanity, freedom from everyone (including one's Black self). Given the reigning episteme, what are the chances of elaborating a comprehensive, much less translatable and communicable, political project out of the necessity of freedom as an absolute? Gratuitous freedom has never been a trajectory of Humanist thought, which is why the infinite trajectories of freedom that emanate from Humanism's hub are anything but infinite—for they have no line of flight leading to the Slave.

A Note on Method

Throughout this book I use *White*, *Human*, *Master*, *Settler*, and sometimes *non-Black* interchangeably to connote a paradigmatic entity that exists ontologically as a position of life in relation to the Black or Slave position, one of death. The Red, Indigenous, or "Savage" position exists liminally as half-death and half-life between the Slave (Black) and the Human (White, or non-Black). I capitalize the words *Red*, *White*, *Black*, *Slave*, *Savage*, and *Human* in order to assert their importance as ontological positions and to stress the value of theorizing power politically rather than culturally. I want to move from a politics of culture to a culture of politics (as I argue in chapter 2). Capitalizing these words is consistent

with my argument that the array of identities that they contain is important but inessential to an analysis of the paradigm of power in which they are positioned. Readers wedded to cultural diversity and historical specificity may find such shorthand wanting. But those who may be put off by my pressing historical and cultural particularities—culled from history, sociology, and cultural studies, yet neither historical, sociological, nor, oddly enough, cultural—should bear in mind that there are precedents for such methods, two of which make cultural studies and much of social science possible: the methods of Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan. Marx pressed the microcosm of the English manufacturer into the service of a project that sought to explain economic relationality on a global scale. Lacan's exemplary cartography was even smaller: a tiny room with not much more than a sofa and a chair, the room of the psychoanalytic encounter. As Jonathan Lee reminds us, at stake in Lacan's account of the psychoanalytic encounter is the realization of subjectivity itself, "the very being of the subject."³⁷ I argue that "Savage," Human, and Slave should be theorized in the way we theorize worker and capitalist as positions first and as identities second, or as we theorize capitalism as a paradigm rather than as an experience—that is, before they take on national origin or gendered specificity. Throughout the course of this book I argue that "Savage," Human, and Slave are more essential to our understanding of the truth of institutionality than the positions from political or libidinal economy. For in this trio we find the key to our world's creation as well as to its undoing. This argument, as it relates to political economy, continues in chapter 1, "The Ruse of Analogy." In chapter 2, "The Narcissistic Slave," I shift focus from political economy to libidinal economy before undertaking more concrete analyses of films in parts 2, 3, and 4.

No one makes films and declares their own films "Human" while simultaneously asserting that other films (Red and Black) are not Human cinema. Civil society represents itself to itself as being infinitely inclusive, and its technologies of hegemony (including cinema) are mobilized to manufacture this assertion, not to dissent from it. In my quest to interrogate the bad faith of the civic "invitation," I have chosen White cinema as the *sine qua non* of Human cinema. Films can be thought of as one of an ensemble of discursive practices mobilized by civil society to "invite," or interpellate, Blacks to the same variety of social identities that other races are able to embody without contradiction, identities such as

worker, soldier, immigrant, brother, sister, father, mother, and citizen. The bad faith of this invitation, this faux interpellation, can be discerned by deconstructing the way cinema's narrative strategies displace our consideration and understanding of the ontological status of Blacks (social death) onto a series of fanciful stories that are organized around conflicts which are the purview only of those who are not natively alienated, generally dishonored, or open to gratuitous violence, in other words, people who are White or colored but who are not Black. (I leave aside, for the moment, the liminality of the Native American position—oscillating as it does between the living and the dead.)

Immigrant cinema of those who are not White would have sufficed as well; but, due to its exceptional capacity to escape racial markers, Whiteness is the most impeccable embodiment of what it means to be Human. As Richard Dyer writes, "Having no content, we [White people] can't see that we have anything that accounts for our position of privilege and power. . . . The equation of being white with being human secures a position of power." He goes on to explain how "the privilege of being white . . . is not to be subjected to stereotyping in relation to one's whiteness. White people are stereotyped in terms of gender, nation, class, sexuality, ability and so on, but the overt point of such typification is gender, nation, etc. Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race."³⁸

Unlike Dyer, I do not meditate on the representational power of Whiteness, "that it be made strange," divested of its imperial capacity, and thus make way for representational practices in cinema and beyond that serve as aesthetic accompaniments for a more egalitarian civil society in which Whites and non-Whites could live in harmony. Laudable as that dream is, I do not share Dyer's assumption that we are all Human. Some of us are only part Human ("Savage") and some of us are Black (Slave). I find his argument that Whiteness possesses the easiest claim to Humanness to be productive. But whereas Dyer offers this argument as a lament for a social ill that needs to be corrected, I borrow it merely for its explanatory power—as a way into a paradigmatic analysis that clarifies structural relations of global antagonisms and not as a step toward healing the wounds of social relations in civil society. Hence this book's interchangeable deployment of *White*, *Settler*, and *Master* with—and to signify—Human. Again, like Lacan, who mobilizes the psychoanalytic encounter to make

claims about the structure of relations writ large, and like Marx, who mobilizes the English manufacturer to make claims about the structure of economic relations writ large, I am mobilizing three races, four films, and one subcontinent to make equally generalizable claims and argue that the antagonism between Black and Human supercedes the “antagonism” between worker and capitalist in political economy, as well as the gendered “antagonism” in libidinal economy. To this end, this book takes stock of how socially engaged popular cinema participates in the systemic violence that constructs America as a “settler society” (Churchill) and “slave estate” (Spillers). Rather than privilege a politics of culture(s)—that is, rather than examine and accept the cultural gestures and declarations which the three groups under examination make about themselves—I privilege a culture of politics: in other words, what I am concerned with is how White film, Black film, and Red film articulate and disavow the matrix of violence which constructs the three essential positions which in turn structure U.S. antagonisms.

Part 2, “*Antwone Fisher* and *Bush Mama*” considers pitfalls of emplotting the Slave in cinematic narratives. Through an analysis of Denzel Washington’s *Antwone Fisher* and Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama*, I illustrate what happens when sentient objects perform as sentient subjects. This is the problem of the Slave film—that is, a film where the director is Black. In addition, to qualify as a Slave film the narrative strategies of the film must intend for the film’s ethical dilemma(s) to be shouldered by a central figure (or figures if the film is an ensemble piece) who is Black. The aim of part 2 is to explore how films labeled Slave by the position of their director and their diegetic figures labor imaginatively in ways which accompany the discursive labor of Slave ethics, ethics manifest in the ontology of captivity and death or accumulation and fungibility. Furthermore, part 2 seeks to explore those cinematic moments (in the synchronicity of the story on celluloid and in the diachronicity of the film’s historical context) when the Slave film is unable to embrace ethical dilemmas predicated on the destruction of civil society and instead makes a structural adjustment, as it were, that embraces the ethical scaffolding of the Settler/Master’s ensemble of questions concerning institutional integrity.

The narrative progression of most films moves from equilibrium to disequilibrium to equilibrium (restored, renewed, or reorganized). This is also the narrative spine of most political theory (e.g., Antonio Negri’s

and Michael Hardt's writings on the fate of the commons under capitalism). This is true whether or not the film is edited chronologically or associationally. *Antwone Fisher* (2002) is a perfect example of how this three-point progression of classical narrative works and why it cannot emplot the Slave. The film begins with Antwone's dream of a large family gathering at which he is the center of attention (equilibrium). But Antwone soon awakes to the disequilibrium of his life as a Navy seaman with anger management issues, juxtaposed with the disequilibrium of his memories as a foster child, abused and terrorized by Black women. The film ends with the opening dream blossoming in his waking life, as he is reunited with his long-lost blood relations. The assertion of the film is that Antwone's period of disequilibrium is not to be found in the structure of his ontological condition, but rather in the performance of his actions (his anger problem) and the actions of those around him (the abuse he suffered in the foster home).

Thus the film is able to emplot a Black person (invite him into the fold of civic relations) by telling the story of his life episodically and not paradigmatically. It narrates events while mystifying relations between capacity and the absence of capacity. This allows cinema to disavow the quintessential problem of the oxymoron *slave narrative*. The three-point progression of a drama for the living cannot be applied to a being that is socially dead (naturally alienated, open to gratuitous violence, and generally dishonored). To "fix" the oxymoron, cinema must either disavow it (cast Blacks as other than Black) or tell the story in such a way that equilibrium is imagined as a period before enslavement. Disequilibrium then becomes the period of enslavement, and the restoration or reorganization of equilibrium is the end of slavery and a life beyond it. The second approach is rare because it is best suited for a straightforward historical drama, such as *Roots*, and because deep within civil society's collective unconscious is the knowledge that the Black position is indeed a position, not an identity, and that its constituent elements are coterminous with and inextricably bound to the constituent elements of social death—which is to say that for Blackness there is no narrative moment prior to slavery. Furthermore, a hypothetical moment after slavery would entail the emergence of new ontological relations (the end of both Blackness and Humanness) and a new episteme. It is impossible for narrative to enunciate from beyond the episteme in which it stands, not knowingly,

at least. At the heart of my deliberations on Slave cinema is the question *How does a film tell the story of a being that has no story?*

By Red or “Savage” film I mean, of course, a film where the director is a North American Indian and where the film’s narrative strategies intend for its ethical dilemma (or dilemmas) to be shouldered by a central figure (or ensemble cast) that is Indian. Unlike Settler/Master or Slave film, however, there is no risk in reifying a definition of “Savage” cinema through dubious and unnecessary canon formation because the filmography is just emerging. The first component of my argument, which exists throughout part 3, “*Skins*,” is that sovereignty or sovereign loss, as a modality of the “Savage” grammar of suffering, articulates itself quite well within the two modalities of the Settler/Master’s grammar of suffering, exploitation, and alienation. The second component of my argument is that, whereas the genocidal modality of the “Savage” grammar of suffering articulates itself quite well within the two modalities of the Slave’s grammar of suffering, accumulation and fungibility, Native American film, political texts, and ontological meditations fail to recognize, much less pursue, this articulation. The small corpus of socially engaged films directed by Native Americans privilege the ensemble of questions animated by the imaginary of sovereign loss. However, the libidinal economy of cinema is so powerful that the ensemble of questions catalyzed by the genocide grammar of suffering often force their way into the narrative of these films, with a vengeance that exceeds their modest treatment in the screenplay. Chris Eyre’s *Skins* is exemplary of these pitfalls and possibilities.

Part 4, “*Monster’s Ball*,” explores the relationship between (a) Settler/Master (Human) cinema that self-consciously engages political ethics, (b) radical political discourse (what does it mean to be free?) in the era of the film’s release, and (c) the Settler/Master’s most unflinching metacommentary on the ontology of suffering. By “Settler/Master film,” I mean a film whose director is White.³⁹ In addition, to qualify as a Settler/Master film the narrative strategies of the film must intend for the film’s ethical dilemma(s) to be shouldered by a central figure (or ensemble cast) that is White. Again, a film founded on the ethical dilemmas of any of the junior partners of civil society (colored immigrants) would work just as well. My goal is not to establish the canonical boundaries of Settler/Master cinema but to explore how a film labeled White by the position of its

director and diegetic figures labors imaginatively in ways which accompany the discursive labor of ethics for the Settler/Master relationship and for civil society. I also seek to explore those cinematic moments—in the synchronicity of the story on celluloid and in the diachronicity of the film’s historical context—when the Settler/Master film tries (is perhaps compelled) to embrace ethical dilemmas predicated on the destruction of civil society—the ethical dilemmas of the “Savage” and the Slave.

I do not claim to have cornered the market on a definition of socially engaged feature film. Ultimately, the power of a film like *Mary Poppins* to help reposition a subject politically or explain paradigmatic power relations cannot be adjudicated, definitively, against a film like *The Battle of Algiers*. While my own interests and pleasures lead me more toward the end of the spectrum where *The Battle of Algiers* resides, I have selected films which have consciously attempted some sort of dialogue with the pressing issues and social forces that mobilize America’s most active political formations. *Bush Mama* (1978), *Antwone Fisher* (2002), *Monster’s Ball* (2001), and *Skins* (2002) are examples of Slave, Settler/Master, and “Savage” films which, at the level of intentionality, attempt cinematic dialogues with issues such as homelessness, the “crisis” of Black and Red families, and the social force of incarceration. Though I have spent years screening, analyzing, and writing about a large number of films that fall into these categories, for the purpose of demonstrating the importance of such films in our unconscious and unspoken knowledge of grammars of suffering, I have found it more effective to perform a close reading of four such films rather than write a book that surveys the field. Given the gesture of sincerity with which such films announce themselves to be socially engaged, I seek to determine how unflinchingly they analyze the structure of U.S. antagonisms.

The three structuring positions of the United States (Whites, Indians, Blacks) are elaborated by a rubric of three demands: the (White) demand for expansion, the (Indian) demand for return of the land, and the (Black) demand for “flesh” reparation (Spillers). The relation between these positions demarcates antagonisms and not conflicts because, as I have argued, they are the embodiments of opposing and irreconcilable principles or forces that hold out no hope for dialectical synthesis, and because they are relations that form the foundation on which all subsequent conflicts in the Western Hemisphere are possible. In other words, the originary,

or ontological, violence that elaborates the Settler/Master, the “Savage,” and the Slave positions is foundational to the violence of class warfare, ethnic conflicts, immigrant battles, and the women’s liberation struggles of Settler/Masters. These antagonisms—whether acknowledged through the conscious and empirical machinations of political economy or painfully disavowed through what Jared Sexton terms the “imaginative labor” of libidinal economy—render all other disputes as conflicts, or what Haunani-Kay Trask calls “intra-settler discussions.”⁴⁰

As I stated above, in the 1960s and 1970s, as White radicalism’s discourse and political common sense found authorization in the ethical dilemmas of embodied incapacity (the ontological status of Blacks as accumulated and fungible objects), White cinema’s proclivity to embrace dispossession through the vectors of capacity (the ontological status of the Human as an exploited and alienated subject) became profoundly disturbed. While many socially and politically engaged film scripts and cinematic strategies did not surrender completely to incapacity (i.e., to the authority of the Slave’s grammar of suffering), many failed to assert the legitimacy of White ethical dilemmas (the supremacy of exploitation and alienation as a grammar of suffering) with which cinema had been historically preoccupied.⁴¹ The period during which COINTELPRO crushed the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army also witnessed the flowering of Blackness’s political power—not so much as institutional capacity but as a zeitgeist, a demand that authorized White radicalism. But by 1980 White radicalism had comfortably re-embraced capacity without the threat of disturbance—it returned to the discontents of civil society with the same formal tenacity as it had from 1532⁴² to 1967, only now that formal tenacity was emboldened by a wider range of alibis than simply free speech or the antiwar movement; it had, for example, the women’s, gay, antinuclear, environmental, and immigrants’ rights movements as lines of flight from the absolute ethics of Redness and Blackness. It was able to reform (reorganize) an unethical world and still sleep at night. Today, such intrasettler discussions are the foundation of the “radical” agenda.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the irreconcilable demands embodied in the “Savage” and the Slave are being smashed by the two stone-crushers of sheer force and liberal Humanist discourses such as “access to institutionality,” “meritocracy,” “multiculturalism,” and

“diversity”—discourses that proliferate exponentially across the political, academic, and cinematic landscapes. Given the violent state repression of Red, White, and Black political movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and the forces of multiculturalism and neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, my project asks whether it is or ever was possible for the feature film, as institution and as text, to articulate a political ethics that acknowledges the structure of U.S. antagonisms. Unlike radically unsettled settler societies, such as Israel and pre-1994 South Africa, the structure of antagonisms is too submerged in the United States to become a full-fledged discourse readily bandied about in civil society—the way a grammar is submerged in speech. Film studies and socially engaged popular films constitute important terrains which, like other institutions in the United States, work to disavow the structure of antagonisms; but they also provide interesting sites for what is known in psychoanalysis as repetition compulsion and the return of the repressed.

My analysis of socially engaged feature films insists on an intellectual protocol through which the scholarship of preconscious interests and unconscious identifications are held accountable to grammars of suffering—accountable, that is, to protocols of structural positionality. In this way, the ontological differences between Red, White, and Black grammars of suffering are best examined in relation to one another. To this end, this book explains the rhetorical structure of Settler/Master (i.e., Gramsci, Lacan, Negri, Fortunati), “Savage” (Trask, Alfred, Churchill, Deloria), and Slave (Fanon, Spillers, Mbembe, Hartman, Judy, Marriott, Orlando Patterson) grammars of ontological suffering; and it shows how these three grammars are predicated on fundamental, though fundamentally different, relationships to violence. Poststructuralism makes the case that language (Lacan) and more broadly discourse (Foucault) are the modalities which, in the first ontological instance, position the subject structurally. I have no qualms with poststructuralism’s toolbox per se. What I am arguing for is a radical return to Fanon, to an apprehension of how gratuitous violence positions the “Savage” and the Slave, and how the freedom from violence’s gratuitousness, not violence itself, positions the Settler/Master.

Another aim of this book is to show how these different relationships to violence are structurally irreconcilable between the Master and the Slave and only partially reconcilable between the Settler and the “Savage.”

A rhetorical analysis of Settler, “Savage,” and Slave metacommentaries on suffering that runs alongside my analysis of film will show these meditations to spring from the irreconcilability between, on the one hand, a “Savage” object of genocide or a Slave object of captivity and fungibility and, on the other, a Settler subject of exploitation and alienation. This leads us back to the perplexing question of the “Savage”/Slave relation. Whether violence between the “Savage” and the Slave is essentially structural or performative is not a question that has been addressed at the level of the paradigm by those who meditate on positional ontology (Ronald Judy notwithstanding). It is a question we turn to now in chapter 1, “The Ruse of Analogy.”