



# “TO BE OR NOT TO BE”: BLACKNESS AND SIGNIFICATION

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## S. ALFONSO WILLIAMS

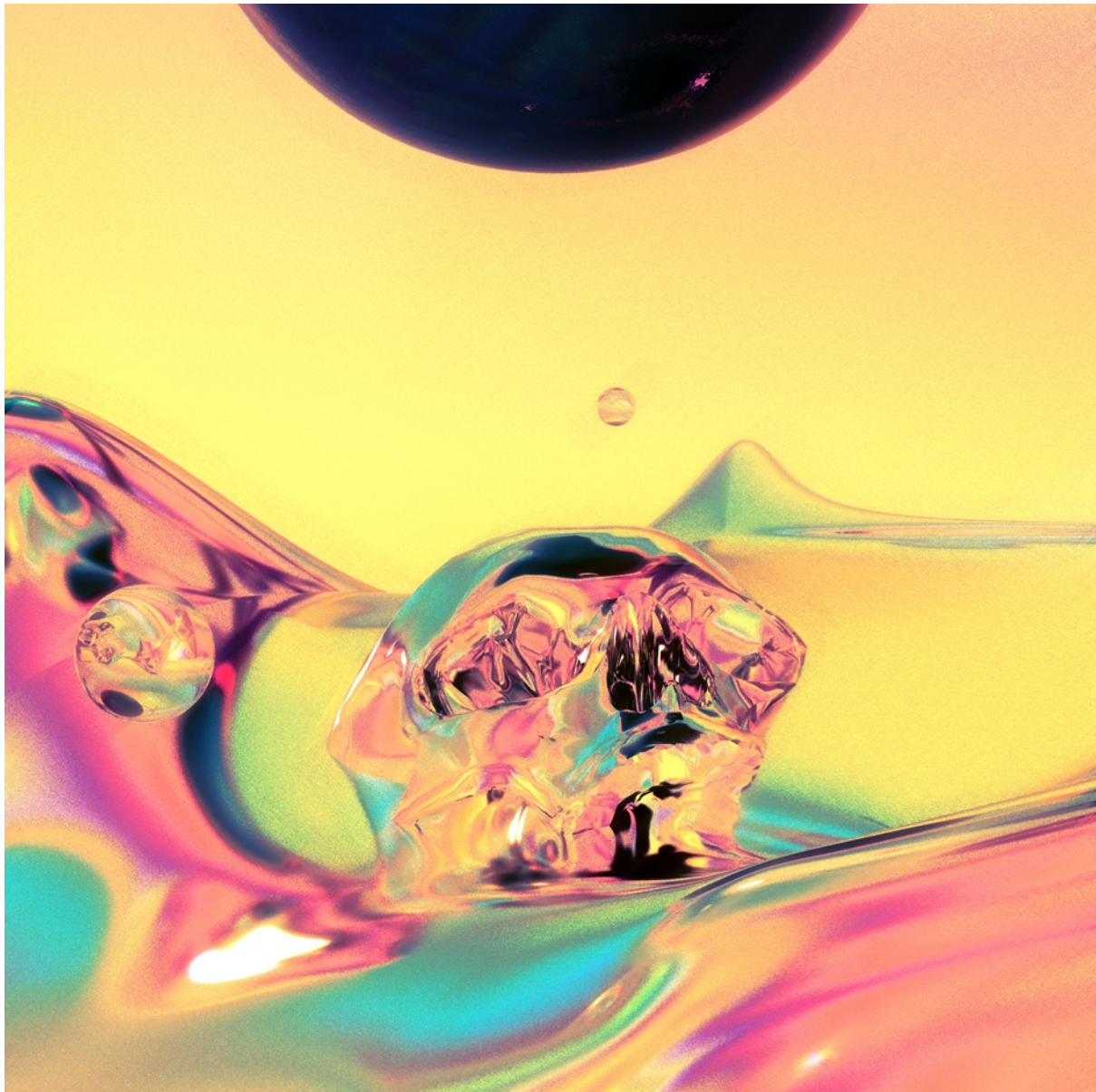
“Black Lives Matter.” We must be in a simulation. There is no way we could take this as a point of debate in a Twenty-First Century Democratic Society. This world can’t be real. Fourteenth Amendment Reloaded. As a Black subject, it is extremely easy for me to question my reality. Black Americans and the entire Diaspora have questioned everything with regard to the virulent anti-Blackness that has swept every corner of the globe. Black Americans have endured anti-Blackness since America’s founding, the Diaspora with the transatlantic slave trade, and other cultural manifestations prior-to. The absorption of Black culture and entertainment is ever-present, but when it comes down to it, no one ever wants to be Black: no one wants to experience first-hand the social implications of being denied basic subjectivity from birth, across the lifespan into death, and across trans-generational repetitions.

Black Lives Matter puts a spotlight on a problem not solely existential, but ontological regarding the nature of being, eating away at the core of human consciousness like a corrosive, inherent bias. Calvin Warren phrases it nicely in his book *Ontological Terror*, the question regarding Black subjectivity: “The declaration presents a difficult syntax or an accretion of tensions and ambiguities within its organization: can blacks have life? What would such a life mean within an antiblack world?”

How is it that we are contemplating paid trips to Mars, constructing quantum computers, and discovering new particles in physics, but cannot come to a consensus that Black subjects deserve fair and ethical treatment unilaterally, without reserve? Elon Musk, Martin Giles, and Lorenzo Capriotti, respectively, raise these issues while my basic rights as a human being are still questionable. These types of wide, behavioral divergences sustain my inquisition of reality in the face of humanity’s social and technological potential.

Despite contemporary uprisings, more volatile than usual, a great portion of the world is convinced Black subjects are undeserving of human and ethical civility. The American South during the Civil War saw that civility was not an option for Black people. The colonization of

Africa and stripping of its natural resources continues in new adaptive forms. Where decolonization efforts arise, non-Black subjects arrive to contest and protest. Indeed, as Warren categorizes it: “The Free Black Is Nothing.” Achilles Mbembe upholds this opinion by relating Blackness back to signifiers, or concepts that stand in for other concepts, and the arbitrary nature of Blackness’ elusive qualification: “we uphold the idea that neither Blackness nor race has ever been fixed. . . . They have, on the contrary, always belonged to a chain of open-ended signifiers.”



*Acid Rain ~ David Alabo*

Mbembe focuses on the contradiction of Blackness and race being af-fixed to the Black subject, while the bar for humanization is always just out of reach. The open-endedness of the signifiers allows the non-Black subject to keep changing the rules of the game, never allowing equality or justice. How do we challenge the unreality of anti-Blackness, validate Blackness and Black subjects, while simultaneously doing both justice? Analyses utilizing

linguistic aesthetics and anti-Black categorizations prove useful in generating solutions through problematizing contradiction.

The first movement toward sidestepping my entire socialized existence is to get beyond the entire field of signification I have been placed in by being birthed into the world. How do I do this? By speaking it into existence. But what am I really doing? Making a distinction between the speaker and the statement, which splits the subject from language to demonstrate those two are not one and the same.

I make the radical statement: I am not Black.

People look at me and are confused at my statement, because it contradicts what they know to be a truthful statement. Enter infamous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier.” Between my uttering of the statement and its intended meaning are a multiplicity of potential meanings bearing reference to things unintended. I’ve complicated the nature between not only the “I” that is myself and the “I” of the statement, but also between my personal identity and how the concept of Blackness functions according to subjectivity as it functions in the Symbolic order, in society.

I am approaching farcical territory where no one will take me seriously, but there is a method to my madness. Dissociating from the semiotic system I’ve been born into means incorporating asignification, sign functioning, as opposed to sign identity, into my framework. This is partially supplemented in splitting subjective enunciations. Gary Genosko defines asignification “in its most general sense as any semiotic that dissociates itself in some manner from a meaning component, or considers meaning to be an irritant. . . .” Note the irony of the word “irritant” with regard to “Black” as a categorizing pejorative. What Black means as definition and how it syntactically operates can be separated into the following domains: signification = identity, asignification = function. Signification regards a sign’s identity and its empirical referent. When I say “I am not Black,” the signifying component extracts my personal identity from the context.

Asignification shifts the sign’s focus away from identity toward its function within the operating structure. The asignifying component completely negates any associations of Blackness from my signifying character. Not only am I beyond the contextual statement, but the negative associations of Blackness in society are equally inapplicable.

Unconsciously (all irony intended), Lacan has a short dialogue with Marshall McLuhan in his infamous *Écrits*. On the basis of Lacan’s statement, the utilitarianism of McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” brings the nature of language to the fore regarding its aesthetic usage in expressing knowledge and actions. McLuhan himself insists, “For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” Returning to Lacan when he says “the unconscious is structured like a language,” the identity–function split destabilizes language’s cogency and reliability to

demonstrate the statement's autonomy and agency apart from the subject's spoken desire. If language cannot be relied on to enunciate clearly that which it speaks on, much less speak to the nature of fact and truth, then the Cartesian cogito structuring our world begins to fall apart. The breakdown between a statement's elements and how these elements collectively form a specific meaning become so ambiguous as to be nearly unintelligible. Language, as an unclear medium, generates the message of confusion. In "I am not Black," the "I" as my personal identity is unclear, and the qualifying noun "Black" no longer refers to something explicitly defined. "I am not Black" is obscure.

"What is Black?"

I go further still by asking myself, "What is a class or set?" The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes them as "well-determined collections." Taking the question a step further, "What is a class or set of Black people?" Two important events are occurring in this statement. In one instance, we are witnessing the phenomena of metonymy within language where, as Koltán Kövecses puts it, "we use one entity, or thing . . . to indicate, or to provide mental access to, another entity." In another instance, the limits of classification have been reached as an extension of Russell's Paradox. Russell's Paradox in simplified terms describes a set that is both exterior to and a part of itself. Further radicalizing the question, I can say, "Who is the most-Black Black person?" and witness the fruits of my metonymic labor. The descriptive quality of such a subject cannot be performed without using words with affiliated attributes. Beef is meat from a cow whose lean muscle provides sustenance for culinary delight and enjoyment. All the words in the previous sentence either deal with the cow's body, food preparation, or the enjoyment from eating food. Words other than Black must be used to define Black, and those words also need definition. Inevitably, no word or concept can be absolutely and concretely defined in itself, but must be described through, and in relation to, other words that are often already associated with the concept. Arbitrary, artificial limitations resulting from the interdependency of signifiers and their meanings are always pragmatically set by the dominant paradigm, the Symbolic order. The 'most-Black' Black person is impossible to empirically know because the foundation of what constitutes a Black person also cannot be absolutely defined.

Reduction and simplification are an essential part of human ontology. People also cannot control their futures from an omniscient perspective, leaving them open to contingency, what other people call fate. Complexity is impossible to engage without it causing cataleptic submission. Simplification works to subjectivity's benefit by allowing the world to be comprehensible at the cost of sacrificing potentially important data, similar to how music data is encoded in relation to bitrates. How does this relate to the sub-question, "What is a class or set of Black people?" Admitting that in order to set a precise definition of any word, arbitrary limits must be drawn, then it must also be admitted that a class or set based on sameness of qualities between its elements suffers the same complex of pragmatic but reductive simplification. More problems arise in the acknowledgment that classification at any level is compromised by subjectivity itself. Phenomena do not simplify themselves for other phenomena: signifieds do not simplify themselves for their associated signifiers. This is

a trait done by subjectivity, for consciousness, to facilitate its unique perspective upon the world.

Reality and fantasy are conventionally viewed as independent. Reality is founded upon the material world, and fantasy involves the psychological conceptions beyond reality. However, interaction between the two can cause pleasure that adversely affects the subject. People often fantasize about the perfect partner. When a relationship is established, this fantasy can continue to operate until the partner over time reveals their own independent character detached from the fantasy. The initial excitement before the decline can be considered a form of *jouissance*, where the subject persists in perceiving their partner in an inauthentic way, delaying the inevitable truth that the partner is an entirely different person. Reality and fantasy are mediated by this enjoyment that turns on the subject, caused by their own, unconscious desires. In the case of racial stigmatization, race serves as the gateway to fantasy, for the racist and the racialized.

There is a negatively excessive *jouissance*, though, that occurs as a consequence of the subject simplifying their reality—fantasy itself. Fantasy is now not just a mental event, but a mode of production keeping the subject in a suspended state of unreality. Slavoj Žižek qualifies a fantasy as something that “constitutes our desire” and “mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality.” Sheldon George will go on to theorize the roles *jouissance* and fantasy play in the American conception of race: “In American society, this fantasy object a, I argue, is often racial identity, supporting both difference and *jouissance*-inducing fantasies of being.”

Borrowing our acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of reality, I posit that each subject’s epistemology functions on the basis of fantasy while grounded in a shared material reality. On this ground, and the required impulse for subjects to express their being in the world, subjective reality can become independent from the ground it is founded on. With this independence, however, comes an ethical imperative to use this independence wisely.

Jean-Paul Sartre makes a salient point in his accomplished *Being and Nothingness*: “The essential consequence . . . is that man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.”

Complicating my Blackness is an ethical imperative, one that leads to epistemological contradiction. I am inside and outside signification simultaneously, embodying Russell’s Paradox. Even though I have to function within race to maintain sociopolitical and institutional integrity, my personal identity is thrown into anonymity by the statement “I am not Black.” An unnamed object is anonymous by existing outside of language. Existing beyond language carries the effect of non-existence. This is beneficial for those seeking to evade identification for whatever reason. Anonymity affords the subject evasion of the other’s enunciated utterances, which no longer have the effect they once had. They are neutralized before they can become weaponized.

Color blindness does not work as a social salve because it leaves the subject open to the problems being covered up by often-veiled racial discourse. At the same time, race cannot become the dominant discourse since, beyond its scientific invalidity, the elements it brings together have complex ties to other elements, such as gender, sex, class, and political affiliation. Properly confronting the issues of race as a concept involves highlighting the contradictions between how identities operate within it, and how these identities become further convoluted with regard to their supposed functional roles.

I am not Black. I exist on the cusp of identity and social function as someone involuntarily attached to an extensive epistemological genealogy many have reluctantly accepted as truth, confused with fact. Fact is impersonal, beyond perspective. Truth is only personal, enveloped by perspective. Truth is what allows the other to reterritorialize me back into a racial paradigm, despite all my efforts to escape their gaze. It is a constant game, tiring from the moment it begins. I lack the energy to continue even though I have no choice but to. I must show the possibility of what can be.

I am Black. George Floyd was Black. Breonna Taylor was Black. I must remain partially within signification for their sake to represent, to complete the mission my forbearers started. My freedom shall not go to waste, as a disgrace to those who died on ships, streets, and by bombs to never have the life I live. Their forced sacrifices cannot be a vanity memory in a redacted, whitewashed textbook. I will represent.

I am not Black.

But I must be.

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S. Alfonso Williams is an independent researcher based out of Cleveland, OH. His areas of interest include aesthetics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, media ecology, and general theory. Influential thinkers include Jacques Lacan, Sartre & De Beauvoir, Deleuze & Guattari, Baudrillard, Graham Harman, and Frantz Fanon. Alfonso received his Bachelor’s in Art History/Sociology from Case Western Reserve University in 2008.

David Alabo is a Ghanaian-Moroccan artist whose works could be described as a fusion of afrofuturism & surrealism. Alabo’s imagery serves as a meditation rather than an escape, as he provides a visual language that is not only surreal but healing. A kaleidoscopic rendering of Africanism through juxtapositions of African tropes and imaginaries, with a chromatic, shiny quality, that he describes as “reflective points,” in both metaphorical and literal terms.

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