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Reflections on the Digital Memory of Trans-Atlantic Slavery

by

VINH T. PHAM

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Reflections on the Digital Memory of Trans-Atlantic Slavery

by

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Within the scope of digital humanities scholarship, this thesis interrogates ‘memory’ as a conceptual frame for remembering Black life, both past and present, in the face of missing historical data and in the afterlife of trans-Atlantic slavery. Such a concept—increasingly taken up as method in the humanities, along with related allusions to the ephemeral, spectral, or haunted—is sought to refuse historiographical and techno-scientific claims to empirical certainty or transparency, and instead affirm its gaps and absences as themselves productive sites for self-reflexive speculation on the complexities of lived experience. Applied to the digital study of trans-Atlantic chattel slavery, memory comes to tie a formal knot between ‘archival gaps’ and ‘data missingness’; however, such a move often rehearses interrelated notions of dehumanization, commodification, and quantification that fail to give a categorical account of racial slavery’s imprints on the present. In dialogue with Black studies and Afro-pessimist scholarship especially, the present study elaborates this problem and the way in which the turn to memory runs up against similar epistemological limits as historiography: Both rehearse the symbolic function of Blackness *as* missingness—as *nothing but* the potential for inscription—and, relatedly, fail to recognize the material function of the Black slave as a debt instrument or money itself (as opposed to a labor commodity). The conversion of loss/absence/missingness into opportunity/futurity/possibility hence only obfuscates the violence of this material-symbolic structure, revealing not that practices of memory take hold of racial slavery but, on the contrary, that racial slavery is what anachronistically takes hold of its methods of backward retrieval in the present, and with anti-Black effects.

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Introduction

Missing information constitutes an obstacle for the historian—the impediment bar none to historical knowledge, its total realization constantly deferred. Yet the work of history revolves fundamentally around its lack thereof, for it is only from these very gaps that history can be written into being. “There is nothing outside of the text,” as Jacques Derrida famously reminds us.[1] This insight is neither new nor particularly radical today, though its internal conundrum remains a problem for thought: What *is* history? Can history only *be* as it *is written*? And if so, then what does this open up or foreclose for our engagement with history itself, and as such the lives—past, present, and future—that are bound to its historiography, even in death?

The ‘memory boom’ of the late 20th century, and the later institutionalization of ‘memory studies’ in the early 21st, seems to arise out of these ambiguities. Contrary to the empirical certainty that underwrites the grandeur of historiography’s narratives, as though history were quasi-transcendent to its inscription, ‘memory’ names a distinctly self-reflexive mode of thinking past, present, and future that makes it possible to think history as inextricable to its mediation. One is inscribed in the very history/memory one seeks to write, and this phenomenon manifests at the level of experience. “Instead of the ‘irreversible past’, the focus now is on a ‘persisting or haunting past,’” such that “anachronism [becomes] no longer a taboo that the historian must fear but a tool that he can employ for his own benefit,” as Marek Tamm explains.[2] Hence, attempting to historicize ‘memory’[3] will produce un-certain and un-objective histories *a priori*, insofar its content is inextricable from the context of its writing. While for some scholars this ambiguity threatens the sanctity of historical methodologies, for others it provides new avenues for historical work to open up to cultural and discursive formations. For

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 158.

[2] Marek Tamm, "Beyond history and memory: New perspectives in memory studies" in *History Compass* 11, no. 6 (2013), 466-7.

[3] François Hartog attempts such a history, narrating the 1980s ‘memory boom’ as symptomatic of an epistemological shift and the emergence of a new regime of historicity towards ‘presentism.’ See François Hartog, *Regimes of historicity: Presentism and experiences of time* (Columbia University Press, 2015).

the latter, the concept of memory is not beholden per se to the distinction between itself to history; instead, its self-reflexiveness thrives precisely in the murkiness of its distinction. It distinguishes itself from 'history' at the level of method; but at the same time, it *is* history, as the ambiguous imbrication of the past on the present, on both collective and individual levels. 'Memory' in this sense—along with related allusions to ephemerality, spectrality, or hauntedness—names a history that is no longer "a projected stream leaving the past behind" but instead something which "bends and twists in a disorderly manner, interrupting the expectations of the 'have been' and the becoming. The past proliferates more than ever in the present."[4] Operating between the murky lines of past/present and memory/history, these claims to 'memory' as a historicizing framework thus appropriate gaps and anachronisms which would normally be seen as a constraint. The 'void' of this murkiness as such is transformed into a referential and usable mode of inquiry into not only the past, but also the present and future.

Picking up on the reflexivity of memory's notion, digital humanities scholars have gestured towards similar themes and modes of appropriation. For example, in her essay "The Equivalence of "Close" and "Distant" Reading; or, Toward a New Object for Data-Rich Literary History," Katherine Bode argues that "outcomes of analysis are inevitably tied to the object analyzed," such that the modern document is not identical to what circulated in the past; to assume identicality, for Bode, is to "project textual singularity onto a historical context characterized by documentary multiplicity."[5] Like history and historical writing, literary works do not exist "in a single time and place"—neither simply past nor present—but instead accrue meaning across the multiple temporal contexts of production and reception; analysis, publication, and proliferation.[6] Hence, there is a "gap [that] exists between the contemporary object assessed and the historical object it supposedly represents," for which "no degree of

[4] Bjørnar Olsen, *In defense of things: archaeology and the ontology of objects*, Rowman Altamira (2010): 128.

[5] Katherine Bode, "The equivalence of "close" and "distant" reading; or, toward a new object for data-rich literary history," *Modern Language Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (2017): 93.

[6] Ibid, 95.

nuance or care in the reading can supply that historical meaning." For Bode, social-scientific measures of statistical uncertainty, applied to historical analysis, cannot resolve this constitutive gap either. Instead, what is needed is a third scholarly object of sorts, capable of representing and mediating the literary-historical systems of "literary works that circulated and generated meaning together at particular times and places[.]" Bode thereby proposes the structure of 'the scholarly edition,' whose references to bibliographies and collections make it an apt framework for producing a data-rich literary history "of transmission." This is to say then that historical contextualization of literary works, on Bode's account, must develop out of this very gap—between a contemporary object and past one—that is immanent to history.

Similarly, Miriam Posner has argued that the problem of missing data, like Bode's invoked 'gap,' might be thought not as an obstacle but rather a creative opportunity to refuse modes of data representation painted as singular, and instead use digital platforms to better express the complexities and uncertainties immanent to lived experience. In "What's Next: The Radical, Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities," Posner asks: "You can assign a number to the degree of your uncertainty for data points, but how do you show the possible universe of missing data? How do we show the ways in which heterogeneous data has been flattened into a model to make it visually legible?"[7] Like that of memory to history, Posner's approach to data is self-reflexive, as to illustrate the ways in which race and gender *mediate* data collection/retrieval/visualization, while also being the *product* of these data practices; race and gender are both cause and effect of data processes. This introduction of identity enables the distinction between cause and effect to become murky; lines of determination become webbed, criss-crossing in multiple directions. As such, instead of remaining foreclosed to modes of representing data painted as singular by large conglomerates, the obscured distinction between cause/effect, like that of past/present, enables a claim to refusal, wherein "the alternative is the

[7] Miriam Posner, "What's Next: The Radical, Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 33, https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1cn6thb.6.

thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire," as Posner notes, quoting Laura Mulvey.[8] In the context of digital humanist inquiry, this thrill for Posner means "capturing people's lived experience in radical ways," because "[w]e want our work to be legible... [and] want people to understand it." 'Capturing' and representing data in this sense highlights human complexity in "ways that are productive and generative and probably angry, too."[9]

Taken together, Bode and Posner's conceptual arguments around data and digital contexts both express the intervention of memory onto the work of history, marked by the folding of past into present and vice versa. As such, the past becomes graspable in the present by way of an anachronistic injunction. Distinctions between memory/history and past/present become discursively *slippery*, and it is this slipperiness that conditions a networking of various concepts that become newly thinkable together: time, experience, uncertainty, complexity, visualization, remembrance, recognition/legibility, desire, loss/missingness. As opposed to simply rendering an inert past transparent *to* the present, the absence of historical transparency on this account ironically becomes a site to transparentize the past's afterlife *in* the present, understood as always-already works in progress. It is from this conceptual ground that a number of what we might call 'digital memory projects' have become a popular interface for engaging these historical gaps, defined notably by the shared commitments to open-accessibility, public collaboration and input, user-friendly presentation, and contextual acknowledgements of its limitations; all of which, we might say, express a claim to self-reflexivity as memory's defining metric.[10]

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[8] Posner, "What's Next," 38; Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." In *Feminism and film theory*, pp. 57-68. Routledge, 2013.

[9] Ibid., 39, 36.

[10] For examples of digital memory projects, see the "Digital Memory Reviews" published on CUNY Manifold: https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/.

In the context of the digital humanities in general, I am interested in how this framework, wherein memory is realized as an approach to history's past and present and future, comes to subtend both written and digital scholarship on the trans-Atlantic. Indeed, Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam's *The Digital Black Atlantic*—an edited volume of "the body of interdisciplinary scholarship that examines connections between African diasporic communities and technology"[11]—begins precisely with the notion of 'memory' as the topic of its first chapter. In their introduction, the editors cite Toni Morrison's notion of 'rememory' to say that "memory is not simply about invoking the past but also about linking it *vitally* to the present and the future," alluding like Bode and Posner to a method of historicization that begins at the level of inscription. Past, present, and future are blurred insofar as the past is engaged as a vitality; an after*life*. Racial slavery on this account must be thought similarly, insofar as it persists beyond its abolition, 'haunting' the present in its 'ephemeral' or 'spectral' traces. At least in this context, memory and racial slavery alike complicate history and announce themselves where temporal tenses and their binaries become slippery, centered around the resolve of Posner/Mulvey's thrill: In "leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms[.]"

However, there is something about this quote, and about the turn to 'memory' in general, that has always made me feel uncertain about it, in its very attempt to affirm 'uncertainty.' "The thrill in *leaving* the past behind without *rejecting* it"—even when contextualized; what does this mean exactly? Subtended by a mutually exclusive but slippery distinction between 'left behind' and 'rejected,' the statement is somehow both contradictory and easily thinkable. If anything, the statement seems intentionally vague as to be universally felt, 'transcending' its written form. This is to say: 'I am uncertain what it even means to simultaneously "leave" but not "reject" the past, and so the statement is left accessible to the projection of what I desire it to mean.' As a result, the *uncertainty* of the distinction becomes resolved into recognizable *certainty*. "We

[11] Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam, "Introduction: The Digital Black Atlantic," in *The Digital Black Atlantic* (U of Minnesota Press, 2021), ix.

want our work to be legible," as Posner says.[12] Indeed, to gesture towards the utility of such a thrill, and of feeling in general, seems only possible when such distinctions—between leaving and rejecting, remembering and forgetting, pleasure and destruction, reality and experience—become necessarily uncertain or slippery. What this would mean, however, is that the thrill of the uncertain is nothing but its sublation into a safe and legible sense of certainty. The thrill's uncertain backwards movement (towards the past) is hedged by its certain forward—universal and 'transcending'—movement (towards, for example, what Posner calls a 'possible universe' of missing data[13]). What this signals to me is an inability to sit in the gap between past and present, or the missingness of data, without the impulse to fill it; and I see no reason to emphasize the necessity of this progression if not to say that 'filling it' as such requires leaving *something* in the past. In other words, the rub of 'memory' seems to be this: In order to not reject the past, and as such move forward, the past must be split in two—into a past which is 'not rejected' and as such 'vitally' linked to the present/future on the one hand, and a past which is 'left behind' as to be 'transcended' on the other. The statement's 'both/and' move in this sense hides a claim to distinction. Paradoxically then, the very *concept* of memory is constituted by an aversion, or *forgetting*. Theories of memory thus seem to thrive not in the abolition of distinctions—on the contrary, they require distinctions (between itself and history, between past and present, and between an 'not rejectable' past and 'left behind' one) in order to represent history as slippery, and hence radically open to the projection of subjective and contingent desires. This allegory—of an ineffable and thereby infinitely usable signifier of memory/history—is, I find, what makes memory frameworks productive for contemporary scholarship.

For proponents of the study of 'cultural memory', the reality of 'forgetting' as constitutive of memory practices if anything further evidences the importance of thinking memory dialectically with history, as opposed to binaristically. However, my concern here has less to do

[12]Posner, "What's Next," 36.
[13] Ibid., 33.

with forgetting as an 'institutionalized' phenomenon than with how the very concept of memory promotes forgetting, which is to say 'obfuscation' or 'effacement.' As it relates to the memory (and thus the forgetting) of trans-Atlantic slavery, whether analog or digital, it would be remiss to see the slippery bifurcation of the past (into one 'not rejected' and one 'left behind') as in any way non-racial. What this brings up is an unanswerable question: Who/what is being remembered or forgotten? Put differently, this is to ask: If there is indeed a thrill in "capturing lived experience," as Posner writes; and if race anachronistically mediates modes of representation; then how does one distinguish between the *capture* of the slave's lived experience to the *capture* of the slave themself? Neither carefulness (of word choice) nor self-reflexivity can resolve this problem if our politics of care are also thoroughly mediated by race. Hence, the question is a rhetorical one, which emphasizes not its triviality but rather the rhetoricity of racial material conditions, and the impossibility of an answer—an impossibility that is, if anything, symptomatic of race's anachronistic tendencies in the last instance. I interpret this problem as what Franz Fanon refers to as "the power of language," or what Hortense Spillers means when she says, "sticks and bricks may break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us."[14]

Picking up on this problem, this thesis is an investigation into how humanistic theories of memory require these slippery distinctions in signification, and with perhaps unintended consequences. It is worth noting explicitly that this does not entail a defense of historiography; if anything, the point is that the 'memory' critique of historiography cannot go far enough. What I am calling into question rather is the claim to memory's self-reflexivity, and the allegory which underwrites it: Of an inaccessible or ineffable loss/absence/missingness that can be transformed (i.e. *slipped*) into a site of opportunity/futurity/possibility. In conversation with Black studies, and Afro-pessimism especially, this study will show that this allegory is central to a fundamental anti-Black trope: Blackness affirmed as *nothing but* the potential to slip into any form or

[14] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 39; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, vol. 2 (1986): 69.

concept, where to occupy this 'nothing but' is to appear as an emptiness, or absence. When the allegory is applied to the memory of racial slavery, the history of this trope is forgotten—effaced, and left to the wayside. Memory, against one's wishes, thereby slips race back into the picture. Following Sara-Maria Sorentino, this emphasizes how "the imaginary zoning of a time before race is nonetheless infiltrated by race in the very movement of apprehension," even when apprehended self-reflexively. This is to say that "anachronism can only be anachronistic *absent a vanishing mediator*"—this mediator being 'Blackness' itself.[15] Thus, as we will see, slippery binaries are not helpful for the Black slave—on the contrary, the former names a condition for which the latter are bound, and for which the appearance of racial slavery to thought becomes endlessly deferred.

Each chapter revolves around an in-depth look into a particular work or intervention as it relates to the notion of memory. Chapter 1, "The Ephemerality of the Trace," will give readers a primer on my analytic method through a close reading of Sonya Donaldson's thorough essay "The Ephemeral Archive: Unstable Terrain in Times and Sites of Discord" from *The Digital Black Atlantic*. Here, Donaldson's notions of memory/history—where memory is understood as 'archival,' and both Blackness and history are understood as 'never lost'—are unpacked to reveal the impossibility of 'knowing' Blackness beyond analogy. Blackness on this account becomes *nothing but* its analogical representation, slipping into different forms, which signals to readers the allegory of the void contained in this 'nothing but.' Thinking with recent work in Black Studies shows that the signifier of Blackness as this 'nothing but' is the condition for the most racist of anti-Black tropes. Inspired especially by David Marriott's mode of reading in his difficult essay "The X of Representation," I seek to clarify these anachronistic connections in a manner that, like Marriott, sits in the contradictions and aporias that emerge when one tries to 'remember' Blackness. This is to turn memory's self-reflexivity back on itself. For this reason, the chapter is written in a manner that is intentionally meta.

[15] Sara-Maria Sorentino, "So-Called Indigenous Slavery: West African Historiography and the Limits of Interpretation," *Postmodern Culture* 30, no. 3 (2020): unpaginated.

The implications of signifying Blackness as a 'nothing but' is further fleshed out in Chapter 2, "The Unpayable Debt of Memory," where I challenge the way Toni Morrison's 'rememory' is articulated in *The Digital Black Atlantic* as a legible concept or speculative method. Turning to *Beloved*, I argue that Morrison invokes 'rememory' in the novel not as a method or process but as something quite similar to Sigmund Freud's notion of *nachträglich*: A traumatic 'memory of a memory' whose meaning can only be deferred without end, and thereby always-already absent. Reading the novel in this light unveils the way in which the character Beloved, from the perspective of both the novel's characters and readers, *is* the rememory of slavery. To *be* a rememory in this sense is to be an empty signifier—indeed, a 'nothing but'—absent of predetermined meaning, and on which one's traumas are analogically projected. Beloved, in this sense, produces anxieties that in the novel congregate into a collective uncertainty as to whether one can live beyond racial slavery or whether one is forever *in debt* to it. Importantly, that Beloved represents everyone else's feelings of debt is not only symbolic but also a historical-material argument, where the Black slave is understood not simply as a commodity but as a debt instrument. 'Rememory' on this account names a problem where slavery is materially reproduced in the modern ledger and in the institutionalization of accounting, and routes us towards a financial history of racial enslavement. Bringing these connections to light, this chapter hence looks to show that 'memory' as a framework alone cannot account for racial slavery's now-ness, and to consider *debt* or *indebtedness* as a perhaps more helpful framework.

In the final and third chapter, "Quantification Anxieties," these themes concerning slavery's financial stakes on historical writing are taken forward into a return to digital humanist concerns around 'missingness.' Thinking broadly, though especially within the scope of digital-humanist discourse, this chapter investigates, on the one hand, the problem of data missingness; and on the other, the humanist anxiety around 'quantification' as a tool for historicizing chattel slavery. This anxiety revolves around a historical-moral dilemma: What

does it means to 'quantify' the enslaved as data in the present, and does doing so 'reproduce' the past mathematics of slave trade? I am interested in how the notion of 'quantification' in this way is linked to 'commodification' and 'dehumanization,' as to write the former into this dilemma. Taking the notions of debt which emerged from the previous chapter, and working more closely with Afro-pessimist scholarship and recent historiographies of slavery, this chapter looks to complicate the quantification-commodification-dehumanization dilemma by first understanding the Black slave as financially valuable not in their capacity for labor but in their mere existence—as especially liquid and subject to collateralization; as an underwriting asset/debt instrument; and thereby functionally *money*. This "moneyness" of the Black slave, as Taija McDougall typifies,[16] is the material expression of Blackness as symbolizing the 'nothing but' that the previous chapters highlight. With this in mind, the main content of the chapter is a close look at the *SlaveVoyages* database, which while known for its comprehensive collection of more than 36,000 voyages, is actually missing a lot of data, where 78% of the values in the database is missing, and 135 attributes have a missing rate of at least 90%.[17] Starting here, this reading of the database moves towards a theory of quantification's racial inheritances by drawing conceptual ties between missingness and moneyness, as opposed to commodification and dehumanization.

The goal of this project is ultimately to unveil and deconstruct a number of assumptions central to 'memory' as a productive framework—the productive capacity for self-reflexivity and anachronisms; the creative possibilities in speculative or imaginative thinking; humanity as lost but therefore retrievable. 'Memory' in this light cannot adequately engage the ways that the afterlife of slavery consistently evades identification, suggesting the need for a different way to account for chattel slavery's speculative unity of past and present. However, what this study also tries to show is that anti-Blackness thrives in slips, uncertainties, and contradictions, such that

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[16] Taija McDougall, "Plantations Derivations" (lecture, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, April 4, 2023)

[17] See Phillip Tran and Arlei Silva, "History as a data science: Missing data imputation on the slave voyages dataset" (2022), unpaginated.

attempts to productively account for racial slavery's past, even when self-reflexive, only mirror its futility. As will be shown, trying to imagine beyond the past ends up effacing its present/future effects; representing Blackness as uncontainable ends up containing it to representation; and remembering racial slavery leaves one lost in its rememory, whose meaning is constantly deferred. I am hence not looking to move 'towards' something or 'do' anything through this thesis, per se. Rather, as the title suggests, I hope that the reader thinks of this work as a set of *reflections*—as an attempt to sit within and mirror the mirroring function of anti-Blackness, without necessarily trying to go anywhere with it. What would it mean to reflect racial slavery back on itself, across temporal distinctions? How does one reflect anti-Blackness' deep imbrication on levels both personal and collective, contextual and universal? If we keep mirroring the mirror, reflecting and reflecting, upon and against ourselves, again and again—will something eventually shatter? Or will we encounter something that has, irreversibly and irrevocably, already been shattered?

I. The Ephemerality of the Trace

Introduction: 'The time of slavery'

The Digital Black Atlantic mobilizes Toni Morrison's notion of "rememory" as a foundational framework for the first chapter on "Memory," the term defined in the introduction as "the practice of remembering a memory and, in doing so, actively reconstructing the realities of the past."[18] Refusing the precepts of historiography and instead privileging the necessity of speculation, the temporality of rememory—which sees the past and future, in a speculative unity, as the sites of creative construction in the present—invites the circulation of various concepts: memory, history, archives, recovery, reconstruction, access, representation, possibility, hope, humanization. Each of the essays in the chapter cohere in and through this temporality, from Abdul Alkalimat's liberating conception of the "Sankofa Principle"; to Sonya Donaldson's figures of "the trace" and "ephemeral archive"; to Amy Earhart's method of critical digital editing as an act of recovering Black scholarship; to Janneken Smucker's pedagogy of digitization vis-a-vis accessibility; to Angel David Nieves' "digital queer witnessing" as an approach to "messiness" in the digital sphere. Taken together, this chapter and the volume is situated at an intersection between 'digital memory' scholarship in the digital humanities[19] and a broader discourse within Black Studies concerned with what Saidiya Hartman has called "the time of slavery," as "the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption (a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat) and irreparability."[20] Insofar as "the distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath," indexing racial slavery as itself a crisis to historicization, Hartman

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[18] Josephs and Risam, "Introduction," xviii.

[19] See Andrew Hoskins, Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition (Routledge New York, 2018); Andrew Hoskins, "The Restless Past: An Introduction to Digital Memory and Media," in Digital Memory Studies (Routledge, 2017), 1–24.

[20] Hartman, "The time of slavery," 777.

asks: "How might we understand mourning, when the event has yet to end? When the injuries not only perdure, but are inflicted anew? Can one mourn what has yet ceased happening?"[21] It is in the shadow of this formative problematic, and of a tradition of Black feminist thought invested in this question, that Baker Josephs and Risam resurrect Morrison's figure of rememory, and forward the digital Black Atlantic as a "transnational and cross-temporal framework" that "insists on the import of race and racism, enslavement, and colonialism in the experiences of African-descended people and in their engagement with technology."[22]

As to not be spread thin, this chapter focuses on Donaldson's contribution, "The Ephemeral Archive: Unstable Terrain in Times and Sites of Discord." More so than the other essays, Donaldson's intervention is to my mind especially attuned to the importance of fleshing out and theorizing the temporality of rememory and, in so doing, the time of slavery. In a close reading of this essay, I look to bring into relief the ways in which rememory and the notion of 'the ephemeral', which grounds the chapter (and arguably the entire volume), is made legible via a network of different concepts that enable Donaldson to articulate a material idea of Blackness. As we will see, however, "Blackness" manages to elude any attempt to historicize *and* remember it. I argue that this poses a problem for Donaldson's intervention and *The Digital Black Atlantic* as a whole. A somewhat deconstructive approach to the essay will reveal flashes of 'the time of slavery' that various notions of ephemerality, transience, and "the trace" end up unconsciously rehearsing.

The ephemeral archive

In the first paragraph of "Ephemeral Archive," Sonya Donaldson draws on Pierre Nora's "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" to set the stage for her approach to memory, history and, importantly, loss. It is worth quoting this at length:

> Pierre Nora writes, "Modern memory is above all, archival. It relies on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image." Memory, then, is

[21] Ibid.
[22] Josephs and Risam, "Introduction," x.

> ephemeral, dependent on a relationship to the tangible, the immediate, and the visible in order to be recognized, understood, and have meaning. Yet history is never really lost because these traces allude to the ways in which we might reconstruct history—through material objects that leave a "tangible, touchable inheritance for those seeking to understand the past." In thinking through notions of the transience of modern memory and the ways in which we come to collect fragments that might help reclaim lost stories, I want to consider how digital creations by those in the Black diaspora in social media spaces—such as YouTube, SoundCloud, and Vimeo, primarily in the form of video and audio recordings and mash-ups—invite us to engage with the ways in which such works might allow us to enact "strategies of remembrance" and direct our attention to the ways that they are evidence of processes of "rememory" through which we reconstruct a route to a kind of historical truth.[23]

Interwoven notions of memory (as archival) and history (as never lost) index the transience of modern memory in the work of theorizing. Here, Donaldson suggests a notion of an *ephemeral archive* as the collective composition of "digital creations as sites of memory [that] force us to reckon with their transience." The intervention of the ephemeral archive is for Donaldson "about reclaiming histories, revealing gaps and erasures in broader historical narratives," though notably also "about *loss*: how it instantiates memory and creates a way of reclaiming Black histories."[24] *Loss* as a concept functions as an important index in Donaldson's method, and operates in two temporalities. On the one hand, the loss of "digital Blackness"—what Donaldson considers the "enactments of Black identity in the digital sphere" as media forms—is a material transience, oftentimes leaving a tangible "gap" when ripped from its original digital context.[25] On the other hand, the existence of this gap for Donaldson points to a "set of ideas about Blackness and humanity" that the original and now-lost object carries with it; in this sense, while the digital memory object is lost, "Black humanity" itself—and this is important—"was never lost; instead it was refused or *unrecognized*."[26] These distinct temporalities, of ephemerality on the one hand and of permanence (of the "never") on the other, are held together in Donaldson's idea of a *trace*. This trace is recognized out of a digital gap/loss, and promotes the reconstruction of history out of "fragments" of (Black) memories, metadata, interpretations

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[23] Sonya Donaldson, "The Ephemeral Archive," *The Digital Black Atlantic* (2021), 19.
[24] Ibid., 20.
[25] Ibid., 21.
[26] Ibid., 20.

that over time comes to both include *and exceed* the original (Black) digital object. Hence, this history is not a pure or empirical form but disparate pieces glued together by the present limits of one's rememory and imagination. "A speculative vision and a refusal of temporal fixity are required to take what is the past, make it material in the present, and merge it with the future-now."[27] Donaldson uses the term "Black digitality" to denote these iterative processes and modes of interactions and constructions that emerge from a trace, and from which a Black identity formation materializes.

'Digital blackness' and 'Black digitality' together register the dual temporality of a trace and act as "coconstitutive" concepts, insofar as Black digitality expresses in itself the creative reconstruction of the lost works of digital blackness. This inextricability, *at the very site of a loss in the digital sphere,* points to the fact that both Black digital ephemera and the Blackness they explicate are therefore ephemeral but persistent, temporally fluid and, as such, "iterative, itinerant, and capacious," thereby managing to refuse total erasure. Blackness' history, though compromised, can be rediscovered/reconstructed when one paradoxically starts at sites of loss. On this account, the problem of loss is particular only to the digital sphere, to 'digital Blackness,' as opposed to that of 'Black digitality'—of the 'never lost'—where Blackness and its humanity is unrecognized but nonetheless present.

A trace can be understood in this sense dialectically, as both passive and active: The trace is *recognized* (in fragments of digital blackness) and the trace *is* recognition (of an original Blackness beyond, or perhaps *transcending* its object and that is *never* lost). "These fragments and blank spaces reveal loss, yes; yet they leave traces of their existence in several forms, which allows for the work of recovery to take place," Donaldson writes.[28] The iterative form of the trace for Donaldson enables refusal of the pure image of the "origin" which grounds historiography while also refusing the melancholy of a lost Black digital object, since this loss is here a site of creative reconstruction and, as such, recognition. The trace is the signifier of digital losses that

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., 23.

are named into something that is never lost: Blackness. It affirms the object's ephemerality and pluralizes 'context" into 'contexts,' the object always-already multiple and beyond itself. As Donaldson asserts, "the ephemeral comes to represent the material"; and while this means that the respective meanings of (Black) digital creations are oftentimes overdetermined by multiple factors in the digital realm, which includes the racialized "vagaries of ownership, copyright, access, and resources," she argues that the past (and therefore present and future) of Blackness and its signifiers—of Black experience, of Black life, etc.—are nonetheless technically never lost, only obfuscated by these vagaries, living on and evolving in various iterations.[29] The trace holds within it the impulses of Black humanity.

The two temporalities, which index the difference between Black 'digital creations' and 'Black humanity' itself, ground 'the trace' and 'the ephemeral' as methods. In the case study which follows, wherein Donaldson attempts to reclaim her own memory and sense of lived experience in a way that would normally not cohere under the empirical limits of historiographical practice, she tells the story of her encounter with a mash-up video on Youtube, which along with other clips, includes a brief interview with African-American opera singer Leontyne Price. In the mash-up video, the interview footage transitions into an audio clip of Price singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as the image of her album cover for *The Essential Leontyne Price: Spirituals, Hymns & Sacred Song* projects on the screen. Donaldson's narrative grafts her interpretation of the song—as articulating "the difficult struggle for Black freedom and the cautious hope for Black Americans and their claim to the nation"—with what she calls her own 'rememory' of the clips of Price:

> In the interview with Price, one hears not just passion but also a carefully articulated rage. A typically eloquent woman who considers her words judiciously and speaks with clarity and precision of language, Price nearly sputters in this recording. Her voice rises and rises, and just before the anticipated crescendo of rage, the music begins. To my mind, this was a carefully crafted mash-up, which relied not on video performance but on speech and music (the voice without a body for us to read). This was Price's and the

[29] Ibid.

> mash-up creator's 'spirited dissent and dissonance,' a necessary commentary, it seemed to me, in that Obama-era moment.[30]

Donaldson's rememory attempts to fill the gap produced by YouTube's act of erasure by extracting what she considers an "explicitly political"[31] dimension to Price's original invocations of her Blackness. While the deletion of the mash-up leaves a tangible hole in the digital sphere, this knowledge of this loss is named into a trace that pushes Donaldson to engage in a *process*—from Price's interview and audio clips, to the mash-up video, to Donaldson's own inhabitation of the scene—to reconstruct the "historical truth" of Black humanity *as* political through accumulated moments of recognition. This process moves like so: (1) the mash-up creator "recognized the *there* in both Price's performance and her interview and used the digital tools and spaces at his disposal to assert a set of Black politics through the active reconstruction of Price's discourse of refusal"; (2) Donaldson, encountering the mash-up's loss "signified by a black hole,"[32] is forced to recognize—to *reckon* with— "the ways in which Black women, when called on to perform, infuse these performances with their own politics of refusal and rememory"[33]; and (3) the very recognition of this trace invites even further recognition of "the ways that discourses that surround notions of 'artistry' and 'merit' operate as another set of codes that locate African Americans outside the context of nation/national memory." On this account, we might say that the 'trace' is a signifier not simply of a loss/gap but of this iterative and capacious movement, resisting a linear temporality, which both reconstructs and illustrates a picture of Price's own politics. And it is Donaldson's engagement with the loss of the video that induces a moment of reckoning with the political nature of the digital sphere, further allowing Price's politics to become clear. A new image of Black identity emerges here, centered by not only metaphors of unhampered movement, but more importantly the politics of "refusal and resistance"—of *freedom*—and as such a claim to humanity.

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[30] Ibid., 24.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 27.
[33] Ibid., 26.

Its conceptual ties between memory, futurity, and recognition precipitate a hermeneutic of digital ephemera that poses a convincing challenge to classic historiography by appropriating what Parisa Vaziri (2019) describes as "perhaps phenomenology's most valuable contribution to the history of thought… [that] historiographical investigation, like any pursuit of truth, begins with objects as they are constituted."[34] It is for this reason that Donaldson, quoting Jerome McGann, reminds her readers that like "the concept of origin itself, original documents are fictions we practice in order to manage their losses and our limits."[35] And it is in this way that, while historiography cannot assume the speculative unity of past and present and future held in 'the ephemeral,' the narrative arc of the trace enables one to engage this unity productively by making (Black) rememory—and thus (Black) reconstruction, recovery, and refusal—recognizably political to thought.

The 'unfortunate' slipperiness of ephemerality

To summarize: For Donaldson, 'the ephemeral archive' names a framework to trace the past, present, and future of Blackness (or of its related signifiers such as Black experience, Black life, etc.) as never lost. Blackness, as both political and human, is recognized from the traces which remain from losses (in the digital sphere), and from which the creative and interpersonal reconstruction of history can take place. In this sense, 'loss' not only bears the potential for historical truth but more importantly functions as a site where one becomes aware of—by being *forced* to reckon with—the ephemerality of digital material, the politics of digital space, and the fiction of origin and original documents. With this in mind, consider the following passage from Donaldson's description of her case study:

> On the user-created YouTube video (*and here, unfortunately, I am forced to write from my own site of ephemerality, my memory*), Price was passionate; one can hear notes of anger in her voice as she speaks about racial barriers that African Americans faced in the arts. It was this combination of an impassioned Price arguing that one's race "has and

[34] Parisa Vaziri, "On 'Saidiya': Indian Ocean World Slavery and Blackness beyond Horizon," *Qui Parle* 28, no. 2 (2019): 250.

[35] McGann, *A New Republic of Letters*, 5.

> should have absolutely nothing to do with ability" (my rememory), alongside a song that articulated the difficult struggle for Black freedom and the cautious hope for Black Americans and their claim to the nation, that struck me as remarkable...[36]

The parenthetical invocation of an 'unfortunate' ephemerality here references her limited capacity of her biological memory; however, it also seems to be a concession regarding the methodological limits of memory/rememory as a concept. Donaldson formalizes this limitation in the final section of her essay as "the challenge of the ephemeral," wherein this 'challenge'—illustrated in three-fold as (1) the non-alignment of Black digital creativity and corporate identity, (2) the question of "who "owns" the ephemeral, and (3) the lack of "a practical method for collecting and organizing these materials"—leads her to call for "a greater degree of vigilance and labor" in "careful annotation, screenshotting, downloading, storage and backup, and, importantly, communicating with the source creators and developing responsible, ethical approaches to those practices of capturing." However, if ephemerality is the representation and inevitable telos of digital materiality, then does the call for "greater vigilance and labor" in data practices not fall flat? Indeed, the essay's final paragraph would seem to express exactly this:

> In my quest to do this work of "recovery" of an "original" artifact, I return to Nora's view on the archival nature of memory, via Jerome McGann, who reminds us, "Like the concept of origin itself, original documents are fictions we practice in order to manage their losses and our limits." *To the extent that loss and recovery structure our orientation to Black digital humanities work, my efforts were, in many ways futile. For what I sought in the 'lost' video mash-up, was already there, had always been there*, not in the sense of its archival materiality, which proved ephemeral, but in its traces.[37]

This final paragraph is rather jarring, and for two reasons. On the one hand, she describes her rememory efforts as 'futile', which would seem to deride the larger purpose of her method, of the utility of recognition, and of any degree of 'vigilance' as such. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, there is an invocation of something that 'was already there' and 'had always been there' in its traces *even without the efforts of creative reconstruction*; which suggests that

[36] Donaldson, "Ephemeral Archive," 24, emphasis mine.
[37] Ibid., 29.

this *something* (which we can assume refers to 'Blackness'/'Black humanity' and/or 'history') is external to and unbeholden to the way it is historicized or represented, especially if done so in a racist way. This latter point is already familiar to us readers, since Donaldson has at this point in the essay already argued that Blackness, *like* history, is 'never lost': "By their nature, ephemera are temporary: here today, gone tomorrow… *not in the sense of total disappearance* but rather in the ways that *multiple iteration*s, edited and shortened versions, mash-ups, and copyright and take-down notices mean that such creations do not and, indeed, cannot exist in a 'pure' form."[38] Presumably, like digital ephemera, the *something* of concern here always-already exists but in an 'impure' form as a trace, and 'Blackness' presumably follows this structure. However, if Donaldson's efforts were ultimately futile, then what remains uncertain is what exactly Blackness *is*, if it is indeed always-already 'there.' How could Donaldson recognize and *know* that Blackness was always there if this Blackness were not, in the first place, already historically reconstructed and represented? Is there a difference between, on the one hand, a Blackness which is represented by its reconstructed history, and on the other, a Blackness which had always-already been *there*, unbeholden to how it is represented? Working backwards, we can see a glimpse of this ambiguity towards the beginning of the essay:

> These digital creations invite us to consider the ways that their existence, *even in the form of the trace*, carries with it a set of *ideas about Blackness and humanity*. These practices and strategies, I contend, are not about reclaiming a lost *Black humanity*, because that was never lost; instead it was refused or unrecognized. These strategies are about reclaiming histories, revealing gaps and erasures in broader historical narratives. Yet, paradoxically, this chapter is in part about loss: how it instantiates memory and creates a way of reclaiming Black histories.[39]

On one level, this passage presents a distinction between the 'trace' (of digital creations) and the 'Black humanity' that is recognized in this trace which, as noted before, demonstrates a dialectic—the trace as both passive and active, something recognized and recognition itself. Yet readers are also signaled to a more implicit and ambiguous distinction here between the '*ideas*

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[38] Ibig., 23.
[39] Ibid., 20.

of Blackness and humanity' and 'Black humanity' itself. And as one reads the passage, the lack of a clear metric of distinction between the two enables a sort of metonymic slip of the former into the latter, as though the distinction were blurry by necessity. If a trace conceptually functions to precipitate or reclaim Black historical truth, then what is this truth that one recognizes—Blackness (i.e. 'Black humanity') or its ideas/representations? Is 'Blackness' a signifier or a signified? Applied to Donaldson's case study, by way of example, this is to ask: Does Leontyne Price's Blackness signify her political ideas, or do her political ideas signify her Blackness? There is an undecidable (in)distinction between Blackness and its idea/representation here, which seems to underwrite the structure of the *something* as always-already 'there' in impure form.

Let us rehash and deconstruct the problem, using this undecidability as our frame. For Donaldson, the trace of a lost (Black) object in digital space signals the presence of an external force (ex. copyright, censorship, etc.), but it also *represents* a (Black) history that can be reconstructed. This history "is what happens when the ephemeral comes to *represent* the material," and Blackness as an identity becomes recognizable and tangible through this history that, starting from the form of a trace, is given a new life of sorts.[40] Put simply, in Donaldson's narrative, the form/representation of Blackness starts as a trace; a digital ephemera; which transforms over the course of historical reconstruction and as it interacts with other agents in digital space. Hence, this process entails the creation not of a *new* history (of Blackness), but of a newfound *representation* of this (Black) history, which is always-already 'there' in its traces as material memory, albeit without a 'pure' form. It is for this reason that Donaldson emphasizes that signifiers of 'origin' are but "fictions we practice in order to manage their losses and limits," and so her idea of Blackness is less *derived* from any single point in historical time than it is—and this is important—*represented by a new form at each instant*, highlighting its "iterative, itinerant, and capacious" nature. However, if Blackness's form is mutable and ever-changing

[40] Donaldson's formulation, put this way, is notably quite Hegelian: 'History' emerges out of a fundamental and immanent *negativity*, which for Donaldson is embodied and named into 'a trace.'

according to how it is represented at each moment in time, where it is changed by another's ideas of it, then would this not mean that the very permanence of Blackness is nothing but the multiple representations of it, coalescing into a sort of 'impure' form? Does this not illustrate that Blackness 'was always there' only because it could be brought into representation, and thus recognizability, by an external agent such as Donaldson herself? To take this as true would mean consequentially that the work of representation, through historical and creative reconstruction, is in fact not futile—rather, it would suggest that from the vantage of 'the ephemeral,' Blackness *is nothing but* the way it is represented.

This is an implicit ontological statement about Blackness that is itself a representation of Blackness as a blank absence—a 'nothing but'—in the last instance, endlessly available to others' representations of it. Hence, Blackness is not a lost identity but *an identity of the loss of origin*. Or, put slightly differently, Blackness is never lost only insofar as Blackness *is* a loss *a priori*. The historical fact of an impure Blackness lies in the fiction of 'pure' historical origin; and it would seem that this very formulation is grounded by slippery distinctions, between fact/fiction, true/false, reality/fantasy. If Blackness is nothing but its representation, it becomes altogether unclear then as to how 'loss' would be any different from un- or mis-recognition. This is a paradox concerning *loss*, though one different from that of *archival* or *digital* loss, which for Donaldson "instantiates memory and creates a way of reclaiming Black histories" in a seemingly "paradoxical" yet productive manner. This emphasizes Donaldson's contention that the 'origin' of Blackness is but a fiction, yes, but it also produces a confusing situation where Blackness is somehow both limited to and beyond the way it is represented.

That this paradox emerges here—wherein Blackness is never lost only insofar as it is nothing but a loss of origin—should be taken seriously, not necessarily because it points to a hole in Donaldson's method but because the paradox is a recurring one within Black thought writ large. Indeed, historicizing/remembering Blackness is a difficulty that itself has a history/memory: As David Marriott explains in his essay "The X of Representation" (whose

arguments and style of reading have been influential for my own here), one finds in a number of classic, postwar Black texts—from Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), or to the early theoretical writings of Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka—similarly aporetic encounters with Blackness as a figure for loss/absence, and as such "a sign that has to be made meaningful so as to be grasped… always arbitrarily endowed with meanings that we assume *innocently* presuppose our significations of it."[41] 'Innocence' here refers to what Marriott sees as the central expression of an undecidability (between representation and identity) in the work of Stuart Hall, whose dialectical method is the essay's main interlocutor and target of critique. The term indexes a paradox in which for Hall, a modern figure of Blackness must presuppose 'the end' of its innocence, or the innocence of its notion; or, put a little differently, Blackness must 'innocent itself' (to knowingly remain ignorant, or recognize as unrecognizable) of knowing an 'innocent' (a pure, essential, or *original*) notion of its being. "To know the *end of innocence* is thus not to know it, or to know that one does not know it, for to become conscious of what one thinks is innocence, or what once was innocent, is really a sense of being driven by what one does not yet know or is unaware of because what is unknowingly grasped is always unguardedly so… The end of any black essential notion can never know, then, the innocence it conveys; it is ignorant of its own essence," as Marriott describes.[42] This representation of Blackness as a *non-innocent ignorance* is what Hall stakes as an irreducible condition of modernity.

While Marriot's reading here concerns Hall's (and Fanon's) work especially, the language of innocence applies to Donaldson's narrative just the same. To avow the fiction of origin is to innocent oneself of the innocence of origin, and as such discover that "modern black diasporic experience, it turns out, *must not only act out the loss of any origin; it must refuse the consolation*" as a whole.[43] To stake such a image of Blackness, as both Hall and Donaldson

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[41] David Marriott, "The X of Representation: Rereading Stuart Hall," *New Formations* 96, no. 96 (March 1, 2019): 179, https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:96/97.08.2019, emphasis mine.
[42] Ibid, 178-9.
[43] Ibid, 181, emphasis mine.

have—whereby there is no essential truth to find and no essence prior to representation, and that one most innocent themself of such an essentiality—is thus to encounter not simply a plenum (of Black history/memory) but in the first instance Blackness *as* loss. "This is the case (*casus*) of blackness – meaning its fall or *lapsus* – whose occurrence has been historically determined as a void haunting spirit, concept, or representation, and that has come to signify its own absence, or absence itself. No salvation is expected for this fallenness, no redemption for its advent, no recognition for its nothingness."[44] 'Loss' thereby concerns not any material (i.e. archival and/or digital) loss but *the allegory of a void* or *absence*, which Marriott names as the 'X of representation.' This figure of 'loss' at the center of the X's notion is less something that 'happens' *per se* than it is a sense of *lack* which precedes experience,[45] whereby the *emptiness* of loss describes the condition of Blackness itself. In Marriott's words, this is the condition of being "a tabula rasa—a blank on which nothing is written but the pure potentiality of writing itself… a reinscription that is nothing but the very movement of its being written and, as such, evokes neither a literal nor figural awareness." Preceding claims to 'humanity' or 'politics,' it is this endless telos that defines Blackness *as* loss. This is the condition, the X, from which modern Black texts (like those named earlier) emerge in the postwar epoch. For in all these texts, "it is the act of conversion—of what is deemed irreparably fallen—that seems to occupy the center stage, with blackness acting […] as *an innocence that is paradoxically always already fallen* (its innocence following on from its fall), or as an X that endlessly presents itself as a sign that can never as such be innocently thought as signification…"[46] Overall, Marriott's contention here is that Hall's thesis; concerning Blackness' inextricability to representation; is itself a

[44] Ibid, 178.

[45] By saying that this 'X' names a "lack which precedes experience," I am drawing from Alenka Zupancic's description of the Freudian death drive: "There is death which is the opposite of life, but there is also death which preconditions this very opposition, and is presupposed by it. In other words, the death drive is out of joint both in relation to life and in relation to death. It is not an obscure will to return to the inanimate, it is a trace of a trauma that cannot be *experienced* as such, because it is prior to any experience. It is a primordial loss ("minus") which precisely was not capable of being perceived (experienced) as a loss—and in this sense there is nothing "psychological" about this trauma." Alenka Zupancic, *What Is Sex?* (MIT Press, 2017), 109.

[46] Ibid, 180-1, emphasis mine.

representation of Blackness as the irreparable condition of a contradiction: a non-innocent ignorance, or a fallen innocence. In this light, my argument is that Donaldson's notion of ephemerality (and of the trace, of rememory, and of speculative possibility) rehearses the same problem, and as such the endless (re)presentation of the X.

It is obvious that the figure of a rhetorically absent and irreparably fallen Blackness is a racist trope, though the way in which Donaldson's method inherits and manifests the consequences of this trope is perhaps less so. How and why do these notions of memory and ephemerality, notably self-aware of 'the time of slavery' as its historical telos, announce this trope back into the fold of inquiry, which these notions had sought to avoid in the first place? To my mind, this happens not because of oversight on Donaldson's part. And this is also not to say that re-inscribing the X, intentional or not, is 'wrong' per se. If anything, this suggests that Blackness' absence is racism's truth. Anti-blackness as such names a condition which evades understanding yet itself cannot be evaded, even self-reflexively. So where do we go from here? To at least catch a glimpse of this inherited X and its consequences then, we might begin with a textual engagement with the essay itself. For insofar as it is itself invested in the work of representation, the essay is implicated in its own method and telos, and as such open to its deconstruction. With this in mind, we might ask: What happens when we see 'the ephemeral' as itself a representation of Blackness, at the level of method? And where are we led when we unpack the notion of Blackness *as* loss/absence/nothing?

By taking these questions to task, one finds that a number of key terms in Donaldson's text are never actually defined, and are formally absent of meaning until indexed in analogy. For example, the term "rememory" is never defined by Donaldson herself, and only given meaning in a citation to Morrison's 1995 essay "The Site of Memory." However, turning to the place in Morrison's essay that Donaldson cites, I find that the word 'rememory' is not used by Morrison at all here. What is actually being cited by Donaldson is Morrison's elaboration of "a kind of literary archeology" in which "on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you

journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth."[47] Notably, Morrison does not label this archaeological method as 'rememory,' or anything at all for that matter. (Morrison's 'rememory' will be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.) Perhaps it is for this reason that when invoked in Donaldson's essay, 'rememory' seems to slip into different definitions and uses: In one moment it functions as something akin to refusal or recovery; in another it acts akin to "the trace" *as* the mediation and thus reconstruction of "historical truth"; and in another it is pretty much synonymous to personal/psychic memory. Yet despite its vague usage (or perhaps precisely because of its vagueness), what is clear from the first paragraph of the essay is that rememory does not hold content in and of itself but is, on the contrary, *evidenced*: "digital creations by those in the Black diaspora in social media spaces… are *evidence of processes of 'rememory'* through which we reconstruct a route to a kind of historical truth" (emphasis mine). If rememory indeed mediates the reconstruction of this "historical truth" as itself "the story of Black lives lost in order to reclaim Black life," then it seems no accident that like rememory, 'Blackness' and its related signifiers are also engaged in this way:

> [P]ossibilities, in Seyhan's conception of memory, are limited to past/present, remembered/forgotten, public/private binaries that seem to foreclose the possibility of futurity, presenting a kind of temporospatial constraint that marks the ways we frequently think of *both digital ephemera and Blackness—as limited, rather than iterative, itinerant, and capacious*. One could, in fact, argue that such constraints that are placed on memory through *a binary understanding* work similarly in the way that Blackness is frequently constructed as monolithic and constrained. *Yet, there is an implied (Black) world* that might be brought into being through our efforts at (re)construction using digital materials, whether mash-ups, original creations, or creative re-compositions.[48]

Throughout this passage (and the essay in general), the signifier 'Blackness' lacks a direct referent, and is only ever given its meaning indirectly in analogy. Terms such as 'both,'

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[47] Note that the emphasis corresponds to Donaldson's citation. Morrison, Toni. "The site of memory." *Inventing the truth: The art and craft of memoir* 2 (1987): 92.

[48] Donaldson, 2021, emphasis mine.

'similarly,' and 'implied' function as literary devices for comparison, underscoring the fact that Blackness can only be represented or evidenced to the reader by way of implication (an 'implied' world through (re)construction using digital materials) or metaphor and simile (as iterative/itinerant/capacious like digital ephemera, and/or as similarly constrained like memory itself). There is no moment in the essay where Blackness is described without comparisons such as these. Indeed, returning to the beginning of the essay, the reader first encounters Blackness not as/in a trace but in an analogy to a notion of "history" which "can never be lost."

In light of analogy, we can interpret this argument—that Blackness' truth is inextricable from analogy (to 'history')—in two ways. On the one hand, we might posit at an argumentative level that the ephemeral archive's recourse to analogy is *symptomatic of* a reality wherein Blackness, absent of meaning without representation, necessitates analogy to cover up this absence by substituting it with the inherent meaning of something else. On the other hand however, the analogy to history is not necessitated by but *constitutive of* Blackness' truth at a textual level, in that it is only because of this analogy that Blackness can be recognized (as never lost) to the reader in the first place. These two readings bump up against each other into a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma. And so it remains uncertain as to whether the truth of Blackness conditions the use of analogy or vice versa—an undecidability that is, once again, conditioned by a number of dialectically slippery distinctions, between cause/effect, loss/recognition, being/representing. Ultimately, the end result is a representation of Blackness as neither conditioned or conditioning, but as *the very slipperiness between the two*. "Blackness appears here as an articulation that has no fixed or definitive code but appears only through its fixity or slippery disarticulation, or as an excess that might just appear as a practice of resistance to or contestation of the codes or meanings of racist speech," to use Marriott's words.[49] For Donaldson, this slipperiness in binaries is a condition for thinking Blackness as not limited but

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[49] Marriott, 210.

"iterative, itinerant, and capacious"; but for Marriott, such slipperiness is, on the contrary, related to the notion of Blackness as *tabula rasa* or absence:

> The notion of slipperiness implicitly raises the question of what it would mean to grasp or take hold of blackness, as thing, sign, or concept? And so determine the question of its orientation, of the place it occupies in history or ideology as that which the conjuncture demands it accomplish? I cannot further explain this here, but this taking hold is not just a theoretical question, given that it is the figure of the *hold* that summons blackness into being, and wherein its destiny is to be distributed among so many cramped, conjoined spaces, a taking hold that will also reveal to it the social death in which it is always already held, and that lies latent, awaiting only the crossing over into the glinting folds by which the white world will enslave it. This hold would then also be what always takes hold, and in its taking hold plunges blackness into the emptiness of its nonbeing.[50]

This reference to the *hold* is obviously to that of the slave-ship in a literal sense, but it is also to the way in which 'Blackness' is summoned, conceptually and historically, 'into being' in the Middle Passage. To consider the hold is in this sense a mode for engaging the inheritances of racial slavery in the now: As Frank Wilderson III elaborates, "to stay in the hold of the ship" is to "[look] unflinchingly at the void of our subjectivity… despite my fantasies of slight"[51]; or to use Chistina Sharpe's language, this is "to be in the wake" of racial slavery—"to recognize the categories I theorize in this text as the ongoing locations of Black being: the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather," and to consider "the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force."[52] Sharpe's renown 2016 book *In the Wake: On blackness and being*, from which I am quoting, elaborates a Black feminist model for an anti-historicist historical inquiry of sorts, wherein an elaboration of contemporary categories of thought unveil their respective inheritances of the complex (and often indecipherable) structures of racial slavery that puncture our present—our archives, as well as our very terms of historical recovery. *The Digital Black Atlantic* and Donaldson's contribution in particular, as I've already noted, are engaged in this method and discourse concerning this 'time of slavery.' In fact, the epigraph of Donaldson's

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[50] Marriott, 211.
[51] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press, 2010), xi.
[52] Christina Sharpe, *In the wake: On blackness and being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 16.

essay is from *In the Wake*: "We must become undisciplined. The work we do now requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives."[53] The ephemeral archive is created to take this call to task, and its representations of digital ephemera are meant to embody this sense of being 'undisciplined,' that is, to representation and the limits of "binary understanding."[54] However, as I've tried to demonstrate, the difference between representing Blackness as 'undisciplined' and as 'slippery' is itself a slippery slope. In Donaldson's method, as well as that of Hall, it seems that Blackness' condition of possibility is always-already its impossibility: Indeed, what is the 'ephemeral archive' but an effort to *take hold* of *the slave-ship hold* by representing the Blackness that it summons, in its unlimited capaciousness, as essentially *impossible to hold*; such that in order to take hold of it, it must be held up against something else that is, in itself, holdable? The problem is that even when this 'something else' is held up against it, the result of this taking hold is ultimately a slip into its opposite, an un-holdability, in the guise of possibility: Blackness' history, meaning, and being is precisely in the absence of its history, meaning and being. In the very attempt to take hold—that is, to be undisciplined—the ephemeral archive slips Blackness into what is perhaps the most anti-Black of tropes (as a figure of a negating absence). This demonstrates not an escape from the hold of the slave-ship's but a re-inscription into it, and illustrates Marriott's point in the passage. '*This hold would then also be what always takes hold*, and in its taking hold plunges blackness into *the emptiness* of its nonbeing.'

What this reveals is that 'the ephemeral,' despite the charitable and open character of its notion (as not limited but "iterative, itinerant, and capacious"), hides an implicit demand: That without its representational strategies of analogy—that is, to preconceived ideas of 'memory,' 'history,' 'politics,' and 'identity' in the first instance—'Blackness' must be otherwise lost/unrecognizable. To my mind, this is no different than saying, as Marriot does, that "representation may well be a way of reestablishing what has been forgotten, but only insofar as

[53] Sharpe, *In the wake*, 13.
[54] Donaldson, "The Ephemeral Archive."

what it ‘knows’ to be lost can never be expressed.” But more importantly, the constant state of rhetorical slippage points to the way in which the very notions of ephemerality and of the trace, as ‘memory’ concepts attuned to the time of slavery, do not escape that telos into a “kind of materialization of possibility” but rather fall back into a representation of Blackness that is empty and as such beholden to both racist and antiracist representations. More so than the ‘challenges of the ephemeral’ that Donaldson names, it is perhaps this paradox which is truly *unfortunate* about ephemerality, or at least the notion of it.

Ultimately, this returns us to the question concerning analogy, which more than just a literary matter, seems to express a condition of (anti-)Blackness. Indeed, in conversation with Wilderson’s notion of ‘the ruse of analogy,’[55] Sara Maria Sorentino argues that analogy is not simply a false consciousness but a condition which toggles the indecipherability and opacity of Blackness under slavery’s sign:

> When the ruse is read carefully with the project of “political ontology,” Afro-pessimism can be understood as oriented towards a more expansive problematic— the impossibility of relating to the slave as anything *but* analogy… This Afro-pessimist orientation is interested less with defending the slave figure’s specificity, which would contextualize slavery as one mode of subjection among others, than it is with the slave’s burdened singularity: slaves as the ground for context, negated in-themselves and only appearing as the infinite source of value for-others… The ontologized slave becomes uniquely empty in an infinitely convertible way, constituted by relational availability for capital and the imagination, and not through the actualization or deactualization of powers appropriate to animal or laborer.

What this points to is a way we might read Donaldson’s own uses of analogy, for what this suggests is that analogy is utilized not only for the sake of writing Blackness into meaning, but for texturing its other term—such as ‘digital ephemera,’ ‘memory,’ and ‘history’—when held against the emptiness and availability of ontologized Blackness. For example, if digital creations, like Blackness, “are not fixed but are rather *mutable*” and as such “highly mobile and capable of engendering many and varied meanings,” then this might be the case not because digital ephemera are self-explanatorily so, but instead by way of comparison to a notion of Blackness

[55] Frank B. Wilderson III, "One. The Ruse of Analogy" In *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, 35-53.

that, *in the first instance*, is inextricable to 'mutability' as its sign. Indeed, Zakiyyah Jackson's work makes this very case, which spotlights racial slavery's experimentations on Black bodies as projects "seeking to define the essence of a black(ened) thing *as infinitely mutable*, in antiblack, often paradoxical, sexuating terms as a means of hierarchically delineating… modes of generating sex/gender and reproduction imagined as excessive to its proper domain or otherwise invisibilized."[56] In light of this history, we might say that racial slavery re-instantiates itself onto Donaldson's text, *taking hold* of not only the absence that necessitates analogy (between Blackness and digital ephemera), but also both ends of the analogy itself. And so we return once again to an undecidable crossroads, since it remains ultimately uncertain as to whether Blackness necessitates the analogy to digital ephemera, or whether digital ephemera necessitates the analogy to Blackness. Can Blackness be represented as mutable because digital ephemera are, or vice versa? And relatedly: Can Blackness be understood as never lost because 'history' is, or vice versa?

The attempt to take hold of Blackness seems to slip further and further into undecidability, leading to only more questions, as Marriott poses: "But what is it that makes blackness so slippery? Is it slippery because it is black, or black because it is slippery? Or, put slightly differently, is blackness slippery because we endeavor to seek after and desire it because we know it is ungraspable (an obliquity that, paradoxically, we desire to grasp), and so contrary to our ability to conceive of it?"[57] It would appear then that Blackness *as* absence is deeply inextricable to the undecidability and slipperiness of its notion, and is implicated in other fundamentally slippery distinctions for thought between fact/fiction, reality/fantasy, truth/false. The ephemeral archive hence does not exceed these binaries but is instead *bound* by their slipperiness, for this very slipperiness is constitutive of anti-Black order. Indeed, when we conceive of anti-blackness in this way, the consequences of the X become more obvious: That

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[56] Zakiyyah I. Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Anti-black World* (NYU, 2020), 23.

[57] Marriott, "The X of Representation," 211.

Blackness can purportedly never hold claim to stability of either side of these binaries seems to be the very condition for which Black people's claims—to the truth of Black suffering—become conceived as always-already rendered slippery or indecipherable, and thus available to scrutiny as untruth. That is, as lie and distortion; or as fiction, deceit, and ignorance. "It is this argument that sets in opposition, down through the centuries, the reality of blackness as an absence in which truth becomes mere persuasion, degraded, or mimicked, and so unknowing," Marriott writes.[58] Repeated presumptions of Black guilt/non-innocence in the legal sphere, and of the purported need for heavy policing and surveillance in Black communities, make this point abundantly clear, as Stephen Page and Allison Page does in analyzing the media treat of Trayvon Martin's murder: "the failure of evidence is bound up with a racialized optics rooted in U.S. chattel slavery that overdetermines blackness as a political ontology of criminality," such that "one cannot prove blackness innocent because guilt is a foregone conclusion."[59] That Black people—including and especially Black children—are always-already assumed non-innocent, even in the innocence of its representation as a non-innocent ignorance, expresses not only a condition for state-sanctioned murder but also the fact that "black death establishes a set of universal privileges that the black cannot claim—including the privilege (of the false promise) of testimony," as Linette Park explains.[60]

If for Donaldson digital ephemera "haunt us because we know that they are still there," then "we are locked out of that particular site of memory, left to contend with our own memories of it to forge meaning" not only because racial slavery haunts the precepts of law but because it also haunts the very ability to allude to a 'hauntology' here. The time of slavery is the haunting of 'haunting' itself, spinning attempts to grasp it into contradiction. Of primary concern here is the way in which Donaldson's method—its notions of ephemerality, its grammar of futurity, and its approach to history—ends up re-inscribing the consequences of racial slavery that it sought to

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[58] Ibid., 198.

[59] Stephen Dillon and Allison Page, "The haunting of evidence," *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 283.

[60] Linette Park, "Unhomeliness—Afterlife and Testimony," *Political Theology* (2022), 10.

avoid, despite (or perhaps precisely *because* of) her astute awareness of its terrain. The very claim to an unbeholden Blackness leads it beholden to representation as the very emptiness of loss, infinitely available for analogy. It is worth emphasizing that the rehearsal of this racist trope is not a matter of oversight on Donaldson's part, nor to say analogy is inherently problematic (or even 'ephemerality' for that matter). Echoing Sorentino, "rather than apprehend the slave analogy as ill-advised, we can at the very least say slavery has not adequately been thought."[61] To forward these problems is therefore not to moralize nor to set up my own departure from representation's limits, but instead to sit within these limits and "assess the risks and potential gains from unwanted inheritance, unexpected affinities, violent friendships, or the ghastly proximity of a family one never chose," as Axelle Karera suggests.[62] In order to at least get a glimpse of this structure—of racial slavery's conditions on our past, present, and future—I think one should begin with not the problematics of either side of a binary but instead with the way in which racial slavery and anti-blackness thrives in the very slipperiness between these two sides.

To more tangibly approach this paradox of slipperiness in relation to racial slavery, the next section turns to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, as the site from which 'rememory' is fleshed out and later inherited in *The Digital Black Atlantic.* Josephs and Risam's notion of rememory assumes a very similar function to that of Donaldson's ephemeral archive,' insofar as both seek to index memory as a medium through which both the past and future becomes sites of recognition, recovery, and reconstruction in the present. Yet as I have tried to show, this grammar of time is perhaps more complex and uncertain than one would like to admit. With this in mind, I consider the similarities and differences between the digital Black Atlantic notion of 'rememory' to what is actually described in *Beloved,* and argue that the latter not only troubles the easy correlation between rememory and reconstruction-as-possibility but also

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[61] Sorentino, 46.

[62] Karera, Axelle. "Paraontology: Interruption, Inheritance, or a Debt One Often Regrets." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10, no. 2 (2022): 160.

reveals the inextricability of “history” and “memory”—as categories of *accounting* for time’s passage—to economic abstractions. Where Josephs and Risam see ‘rememory’ as a practical method and grammar of futurity, this reading of *Beloved* emphasizes the term as *the memory of a memory* that is traumatic, unbearable, and indecipherable by virtue of racial slavery’s violence. ‘Rememory’ in this sense inhabits the structure of an *unpayable debt* to a past that haunts any claim on the present and future. As such, this reading will center the notion of *debt* as a model for thinking the ‘time of slavery,’ and will stage my method in Chapter 3.

II. The Unpayable Debt of Memory

Introduction: On Pierre Nora's historical anxiety

By way of priming the main reading of Beloved in this chapter, I want to first consider Donaldson's analogy between 'Blackness' and 'history' as both never lost. It is this analogy which sets the tone for Donaldson's method, and so it seems only responsible to at least try and contextualize the condition, escape, and inheritance of the claim that "'history can never be lost.' While writing an entire genealogy of thought around this statement would require a book of its own, we might encounter a flash of its conditions by briefly engaging Pierre Nora's "Between Memory and History: Les *Lieux de Mémoire*"[63]—a text from which Donaldson derives her notions of memory (as archival/ephemeral) and as such history (as never lost), but also from which 'digital memory' can work as an intellectual endeavor.

Nora's highly-cited 1984 essay serves as the introduction to the first volume of his three-volume collection *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, ('The Realms of Memory'), which tracks the production of French national memory and the ever-blurring modern distinction between 'memory' and 'history.' The *lieux de mémoir*e—the 'realms' or 'sites' of memory that Nora takes as his focus of study—are particular objects, places, or abstractions that embody the functional, material, symbolic force of 'history,' ranging from certain monuments and memorials to literary genres and historical events themselves. For Nora, the existence of *lieux de mémoire* is a peculiarly modern phenomenon in France: In what he describes as a "conquest and eradication of memory by history," there is an incessant drive to historicize and unearth any and everything, registering for him a modern consciousness which assumes a discontinuity between past and present, and as such a never-ending imperative to recover the former.[64] The increased production of archives at the time exemplifies the reality of this modern shift, which Nora sees as a dangerous problem. "The indiscriminate production of archives is the acute effect of a new

[63] Nora, Pierre. "Between history and memory: Les lieux de mémoire." *Representations* 26, no. 9 (1989): 7-24.
[64] Ibid, 8.

consciousness, the clearest expression of the terrorism of historicized memory," Nora writes.[65] He argues that *lieux de mémoire* are produced out this *terrorism*, as "the intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history," where the historian [becomes] no longer a memory-individual but, in himself, a lieu de mémoire"—a transcendental and universal authority.[66]

Nora's negative opinion on archives would seem to contrast with that of Donaldson who sees in the archive a notion of interiority and agency, and as such the opportunity to avoid historical amnesia. In "The Ephemeral Archive," Donaldson's first few sentences quotes the following from Nora: "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image." Placed in the larger context of Nora's argument, we indeed find what at first glance seems to be a fundamental opposition between his and Donaldson's respective arguments:

> Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. What began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording. The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs—hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past. Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable. Have we not sufficiently regretted and deplored the loss or destruction, by our predecessors, of potentially informative sources to avoid opening ourselves to the same reproach from our successors?[67]

Where Donaldson reads in "the materiality of the trace" a practice for "avoidance of amnesia," Nora sees the sign of *lieux de mémoire* and the symptom of history's subsumption of memory. If for Donaldson "history was never lost," it would seem that for Nora history is the very condition of loss. How do we square this circle?

We see Donaldson and Nora's arguments converge as the latter begins to mobilize *lieux de mémoire* as itself a history and method, grounded first by distinguishing 'modern memory'

[65] Ibid, 14.
[66] Ibid, 12.
[67] Ibid, 13.

from what he calls 'true' or 'real' memory. If the former denotes the paranoid drive to historicize as a strictly modern phenomenon, then the latter in contrast concerns a sense of memory that is "social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies." Drawing on the renowned sociologist of memory, Maurice Halbwachs, Nora stakes the claim that, as opposed to history's claim to universal authority, "there are as many memories as there are groups," such that "memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual." In the face of 'history,' this 'true memory' has now "taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories."[68] Where secular historicism consistently draws distinctions between past and present in order to recover the former, 'true memory' here is understood as relational and collective. In this vein, quite similar to how Donaldson articulates her notion of an 'ephemeral archive,' Nora calls for "another history" in the very notion of *lieux de mémoire*. Despite its origination from history's terrorism, these sites are affirmed in a way similar to how Donaldson describes Blackness and digital ephemera's shared *mutability*, wherein *lieux de mémoire* are "mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity," illustrated by their "capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications." For example, certain works of memoir (and similarly, of autobiography and documentary) can be understood as *lieux de mémoire*, insofar as "they complicate the simple exercise of memory with a set of questions directed to memory itself" by implying "an awareness of other memoirs, a superimposition of the man of letters and the man of action, the identification of individual discourse with collective discourse, the insertion of individual rationality into raison d'etat: all motifs that [...] compel us to think of them as *lieux de memoire*." This intertwining of various signs/symbols with material objects/events as such entails a history of *lieux de mémoire*, which is a meta-aware turning of history on itself; a

[68] Ibid.

historicization of history and a remembering of memory; that registers "the existence of an invisible thread linking apparently unconnected objects." Indeed, *lieux de mémoire* in this sense functions very similarly to Donaldson's notion of a 'trace,' such that both seem to share with a general optimism of the will *to remember* as a positive endeavor. "The value of a first attempt at a typology would lie not in its rigor or comprehensiveness, not even in its evocative power, but in the fact that it is possible."

Yet it seems to me that where Donaldson and Nora share this attempt at 'another history,' they also share a certain anxiety. As I tried to show in the previous chapter, Donaldson's gesture towards the 'unfortunate' challenges of the ephemeral signal a suspicion of the unresolvable gap between Blackness and its idea/representation that re-inscribes it in the hold of the slave-ship. Insofar as this revolves a concern around the limitations of 'the past' (and as such the need to establish a grammar of futurity), Nora seems to express a similar anxiety when he asks, "Have we not sufficiently regretted and deplored the loss or destruction, by our predecessors, of potentially informative sources to avoid opening ourselves to the same reproach from our successors?" Indeed, Nora's problem with what he calls 'modern memory' is precisely the imperative that everything has a history, and as such needs to be unearthed and made transparent, *ad infinitum*. We could say in this sense that throughout "Between Memory and History," Nora is anxious about everyone else's anxiety—a socialized paranoia, stuck in a sad repetition of pleasure and regret, where "paradoxically, distance demands the rapprochement that negates it while giving it resonance."[69] In this way, the goal of *Les Lieux de Mémoire* was to produce an account of how 'true memory' was "transformed by its passage through history."

Nora's melancholy around the verging death of 'true memory' is for him marked by the "decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception." In a sudden jab at Sigmund Freud, Nora claims that "we owe to Freud" his notion of "the primal scene," which invites "the total psychologization

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[69] Ibid, 17.

of contemporary memory" and in so doing a demand that the individual bear the weighty *burden* of history:

> The atomization of a general memory into a private one has given the obligation to remember a power of internal coercion. It gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity; when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals… What is being remembered? *In a sense, it is memory itself*. The psychologization of memory has thus given every individual the sense that his or her salvation ultimately depends on *the repayment of an impossible debt*.[70]

In this impactful passage, what we see is a peculiar and complex relationality of signifiers—of memory and identity, of obligation and salvation, and of what I see as a central figure: "an impossible debt." Nora's invocation of memory as itself remembered—the 'memory of memory' so to speak—predicts his idea of *lieux de mémoire* as that which exceeds historicity (i.e. the historicizing of history/the remembering of memory). At the same time, it also points to the impossibility of retrieving a 'true' origin or 'primal scene' of memory (and as we know, this is notably similar to Donaldson's emphasis on the fiction of origin). Taking the allusion to Freud seriously, there is no other way to read this gesture of a 'memory of memory' than as an implicit reference to Freud's *nachträglich* (more well-known in the French *aprés-coup*)—that is, situation where a "second scene can endow the first one with pathogenic force," as Jacques Laplanche explains.[71] Put simply, *nachträglich* is the memory of not an original scene but the memory *of a memory* of that scene, demonstrating the impossible task of identifying the primal scene of the analysand's hysteria and trauma, as Freud outlines in his famous 'Wolf Man' case study. Reading Nora's intervention in this light, what we see is a link between his illustration of modern memory's impossibility—where the demands of history fail to produce a true history—and his invocation of an "impossible debt." Economic abstraction mediates the legibility of his fear, and it seems it is precisely this figure of debt that induces anxiety for not

[70] Ibid, 16, emphasis mine.
[71] Laplanche, Jean, and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. "The language of psycho-analysis.(Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith)." (1973).

only the French citizen of his study but also Nora himself. In the face of this debt, the following passage from the final page of the essay reads as particularly interesting:

> Reflecting on *lieux de mémoire* transforms historical criticism into critical history—and not only in its methods; it allows history a secondary, purely transferential existence, even a kind of reawakening. Like war, the history of *lieux de memoire* is an art of implementation, practiced in the fragile happiness derived from relating to rehabilitated objects and from the involvement of the historian in his or her subject. It is a history that, in the last analysis, rests upon what it mobilizes: *an impalpable, barely expressible, self-imposed bond; what remains of our ineradicable, carnal attachment to these faded symbols*; the reincarnation of history as it was practiced by Michelet, irresistibly putting to mind the recovery from lost love of which Proust spoke so well—that moment when the obsessive grasp of passion finally loosens but whose true sadness is no longer to suffer from what one has so long suffered, henceforth to understand only with the mind's reason, no longer with the unreason of the heart.[72]

The 'impossible debt' mentioned earlier in the text suggests that this figure of an 'impalpable, barely expressible, self-imposed bond' is a double entendre: On the one hand, the bond might refer to ethical relations between the historian, their subject, and their collective objects, conditioned within the *lieux de mémoire* themselves—that is, "a differentiated network to which all of these separate identities belong, an unconscious organization of collective memory that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness."[73] Yet on the other hand, this bond is a debt security; a loan, an IOU; where these relations of *lieux de mémoire* are but relations of exchange, and where collective responsibility is the site of carnal attachments and unequal demands. This double reading, put simply, would seem to throw into question any easy claim to collective memory, for what the slipperiness notion of this 'bond' suggests is that the history of *lieux de mémoire* is a double-edged sword.

If history and Blackness alike are never 'lost,' then it would seem such is the case precisely by virtue of the fact that 'recognition' is but a sign of collectivity, or at least the desire for it. However, it seems to me that the figure of an impossible debt throws a wrench into the gesture of 'true' or collective memory in ways that Nora cannot consciously engage. These passages would seem to suggest that there is a materiality to the fear of debt, which signals more

[72] Nora, 24, emphasis mine.
[73] Ibid, 23.

difficult questions: What makes the debt of democratized history unpayable, and what makes it so anxiety-inducing for the proponents of 'true' memory? Why does this feeling of debt need to be avoided epistemologically, and why does it not align with the ideals of collectivity? For some, might the collectivity of memory be just as much a burdensome debt as individual memory, if not more? In order to lean into collective memory, Nora must assume that the collective imagination and the impossible debt sit in opposition. As such, he elides the history of indebtedness and obligation as concepts themselves—a history that is undoubtedly a racial one. We should thus ask: Who can afford to ignore these debts of the past, and what are the consequences of ignorance in this sense?

I argue that where Nora brushes past memory's relation to the notion of debt, Toni Morrison illustrates them as inextricable. In attending to terms of money, exchange, and debt, Morrison emphasizes that the capacity for freedom and the imagination afforded by her narrative method is subtended by a serious ambivalence—as to how much the past can or should be let into the present, whether the past can be intentionally controlled, and whether the social claim on self-hood and agency in the present is necessary or actually violent. Her intertwined notions of memory with debt suggest her refusal to stake a straightforward or easily auspicious notion of rememory, making the term hard to define. I see Morrison's ambivalence as radically contrary to how her work, and specifically her term 'rememory,' is understood in *The Digital Black Atlantic*. The consequences of *memory*, as a historical method, become clearer when these differences are elaborated.

The slippery notion of 'rememory'

As 'rememory' is invoked in the first chapter of *The Digital Black Atlantic*, particularly in the "Introduction" as well as Donaldson's "The Ephemeral Archive," the term acts as a sort of vector through which an act of historical-speculative reconstruction takes shape epistemologically. The term mediates the imagination's grammar of futurity, and is valorized as such. However, we might say that an ambivalence, registered by rememory, ends up convoluting

the way it is used in contemporary thought, and in *The Digital Black Atlantic* specifically. For what we see in the latter is that citations to the term are unclear at best. I have already detailed this issue in the first chapter of this thesis, wherein we see Donaldson cite 'rememory' to an essay of Morrison's that does not use the term at all. Similarly, Josephs and Risam's introduction essay also names Morrison directly to claim that 'rememory' is "the practice of remembering a memory and, in doing so, actively reconstructing the realities of the past," such that "memory is not simply about invoking the past but also about linking it vitally to the present and the future"[74]—however, there is no in-page citation or footnote here that would lead the reader to where Morrison herself uses the term, much less provide this definition. Instead, there is only a bibliographic reference to Morrison's Beloved, where 'rememory' is indeed used. But if 'rememory' is said not by Morrison herself but through her characters, then would this not mean that rememory is not only a narrative-reconstructing practice, but also a part of the narrative itself? Indeed, if we turn to *Beloved*, what we actually see is rememory invoked not as a method, practice, or even sign of subjective interiority (as like personal memory), but as something external and objective, unpredictable and traumatic:

> "I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world."[…]
>
> "Can other people see it?" asked Denver.
>
> "Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there [Sweet Home]. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you."[75]

[74] Josephs and Risam, 2021.
[75] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage International. (2004), 35-6.

Here, *rememory* functions in the text less as a method at all than as an expression of Freud's *nachträglich*: The memory of a memory of a 'picture' whose meaning one cannot capture but only defer. Rememory is something you bump into, not something you grasp, or *take hold* of. And furthermore, outside *Beloved*, the only place I could find where Morrison defines rememory herself is in her posthumous 2019 essay "I wanted to carve out a world both culture specific and race-free."[76] In this essay, the term is still not invoked as a method, but as a term which joins the characters of *Beloved* to Morrison's own desire for her imagination to be "as unencumbered as possible and as responsible as possible," and as such "carve out a world both culture specific and "race-free." However, her ambivalence is palpable, because she understands that this desire produces "a project full of paradox and contradiction":

> First was my effort to substitute and rely on memory rather than history because I knew I could not, should not, trust recorded history to give me the insight into the cultural specificity I wanted. Second, I determined to diminish, exclude, even *freeze any (overt) debt* to western literary history. Neither effort has been entirely successful, nor should I be congratulated if it had been. Yet it seemed to me extremely important to try.
>
> [...] It was in Beloved that all of these matters coalesced for me in new and major ways. History versus memory, and memory versus memorylessness. Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past. And it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative. The effort to both remember and not know became the structure of the text. *Nobody in the book can bear too long to dwell on the past; nobody can avoid it…* Therefore not only is the major preoccupation of the central characters that of reconstituting and recollecting a usable past… but also the narrative strategy the plot formation turns on the *stress* of remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process. In the final pages *memory is insistent yet becomes the mutation of fact into fiction then folklore and then into nothing*.[77]

Morrison describes here the way in which her own "effort to both remember and not know" became the structure of *Beloved* itself. The characters of the novel channel her own drive to write into existence her own literary heritage of slave narratives, and the struggle to do so in an inextricability to a racial past and racial language of history that she wishes to forget. Her

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[76] Morrison, Toni. "I wanted to carve out a world both culture specific and race-free: an essay by Toni Morrison." The Guardian 8 (2019).

[77] Ibid.

tentative insistence to try and rely on memory instead of history, whether recorded or literary, bespeaks a problem that *Beloved* brings into novel form, wherein its characters are preoccupied with not only making the past usable but also with the inevitable *stress* of remembering this past. This tentative insistence is thus also an insistent tentativeness: The very attempt to privilege memory is undercut by a stressful, traumatic memory that is unbearable, such that it slips through multiple signifiers, through fact and fiction, before eventually falling into indecipherability—into the absence of a "nothing." Hence, *rememory* here concerns not only "the chances of liberation" that the imagination can afford, but also the consequences of a problem where the imagination is unable to fully obviate and "freeze" its debts to the written past. That is, to the way it is written as recorded or literary history, and to the rememory of racial slavery that resists inscription.

As I have tried to show, *The Digital Black Atlantic*, Pierre Nora's work, and the conversion of 'memory' into method seem to be inextricable to a binding and anxiety-inducing notion of a debt. Given that this ghastly and ambivalent sense of 'debt' seems important to Morrison's, then 'rememory' uses and misuses in digital humanities scholarship needs to be more seriously unpacked. The non-citations to Morrison's debt imagery, which is inextricable from her notion of rememory, suggests that there is perhaps some sort of simplification happening. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will outline a close reading of *Beloved* that attempts to unpack the violent intimacy between monetary figures of debt and the writing of history, memory, and rememory. As we will see, this sense of debt is inextricable from the economic and monetary language used in Beloved, for it is through this sort of imagery that memory, race, Blackness, and the ghastly inheritances of trans-Atlantic slavery can be understood in the present.

Rememory as debt in *Beloved*

In *Balancing the Books: Faulkner, Morrison, and the Economies of Slavery*, Erik Dussere documents the way in which "throughout her novels Morrison is concerned with the

connection between slavery's economic structure and twentieth-century black individuals and communities, but the issues surrounding slavery are dealt with most explicitly in her 1987 novel *Beloved*," wherein the "ubiquitous use of monetary and debt-based imagery... implies a disturbing persistence of the slave past within the present moment of the narrative."[78] Drawn from Trudier Harris' essay "Escaping Slavery But Not Its Images," there is an identification between Morrison's monetary imagery and the problem of (re)memory vis-a-vis history:

> At striking jolts in the narrative, Morrison reverts our attention to the buying and selling of human beings by inserting images of monetary units to describe physical features and to convey states such as frustration and remorse... Monetary images also become the language of desire in the novel, as characters express their greatest wants in financial terms.
>
> Ultimately, these monetary images succeed in sending mixed messages about how well the characters in *Beloved* have succeeded in transcending slavery. If black people are indeed free of slavery, then why burden them with evocations of that condition?"[79]

For Dussere, whose findings resonate greatly with mine, Morrison's (and William Faulkner's) economic allusions express her identification and attempt to write out of "the accounting ledger as a model of historical narrative,"[80] and the complex, nonlinear, even lyrical presentation of *Beloved* attests to that attempt. The figure of the ledger determines "slavery as a complex of ideology, form, and historical material—a set of discourses which are formed by and formulated through economic terms,"[81] insofar as the word 'account' itself marks a conjunction of history and economy. Accounting is discursively concerned with narrating events and actions, where "to speak historically is to provide an account of events which must be measured and balanced against others; to tell what one knows or has seen is to recount, and to provide moral evaluations of those involved is to assess accountability... a discursive practice which organizes the material of history in a particular narrative, and the structures of meaning provided by

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[78] Erik Stephen Dussere, *Balancing the Books: Faulkner, Morrison, and the Economies of Slavery* (Rutgers The State University of New Jersey-New Brunswick, 1998), 48.

[79] Trudier Harris, "Escaping Slavery but Not Its Images," *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (1993): 333, 338.

[80] Dussere, "Balancing the Books," ii.

[81] Ibid, 27.

accounting are influential in constructing our understanding of the past."[82] Put simply, the ledger is a financial instrument whose logics diffuse into discourse as a model for narrating past events, and Dussere traces its logic from the history of double-entry bookkeeping (DEB) and its intimate relation to writing practice, finding at this intimacy's core a notion of balance: "the first assumption of the double-entry system is that, at the end of the day, at the moment of reckoning, the books will be balanced… DEB [is] a closed system, operating according to a set of internal rules and with its own internally consistent logic."[83] Especially crucial here is the way in which these rules are grounded in the "quantification of qualities," an assertion of equivalency, because by "speaking primarily in numbers and abbreviations, the ledger asserts its language to be both objective and transparent, and in that language renders all things comparable since each can be assigned a financial value in the form of a numeric sign," implicitly hiding away an assertion that "an autonomous and Iaw-governed domain known as 'the market'" that subsumes experience in the language of exchange.[84] This logic of the ledger takes on special significance in nineteenth-century America, as it is diffused and institutionalized through American military, educational, and industrial institutions, such that "if at its conception the ledger implies an autonomous rule-governed market, at the moment of its diffusion the ledger makes those rules applicable generally for the governing of people, so that one's selfhood becomes linked to one's place within the economic sphere."[85] What this implies is a *haunting* relation between the history of accounting and the narrative/written form of history itself: Is it possible to write history outside the discursive reach of the ledger?

This question is what Dussere encounters in his reading of Morrison's work and *Beloved* in particular, where the inscription of Beloved's name on her tombstone implicitly drives the novel, bearing the trace of racial slavery that haunts each moment and character of the story. While "Morrison's characters believe that they have, if not transcended, then at least paid for

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[82] Ibid 28.
[83] Ibid 30.
[84] Ibid 31-2.
[85] Ibid 33.

whatever debts they may have accumulated during slave times," Morrison herself seems to be "forever insisting that the attempt to figure these debts and payments on a ledger will not hold up: *at the moment when an ex-slave believes he or she has offered the final, absolute overpayment that will settle past business, another creditor arrives at the door*."[86] The tombstone is a symbol of inscription that, in addition to Morrison's clear figurations of money and debt, signals an allusion to written records, which the ledger enables discursively. In this way, the central and oft-acknowledged tension in Beloved—between the past and the present it haunts—can be further understood by applying it to Morrison's expressed ambivalences concerning narrative (vis-a-vis history) in conjunction with the narrative capacities of the ledger. As Dussere aptly explains: "The figure of the ledger represents a model of historical narrative which Faulkner and Morrison invoke specifically in order to surpass. But the fact that the ledger lingers as a textual trace in their novels also indicates that those novels have some investment in this narrative form, that they cannot assimilate or negate it completely."[87]

What this means is that Nora's gesture towards an 'impossible debt,' as it relates to his concerns around memory, is not an innocent metaphor but a mediated figure that is undergirded by accounting as a narrative form and discursive practice. Furthermore, to understand the trace of racial slavery as operating at the level of narrative is radically different than the way 'the trace' is conceptualized by Donaldson, who indexes loss and its attending trace as the *possibility* of re-narration. *Beloved* brings to light the fact that even this re-narration, as well as the very *categories* of loss and trace that engender it, may themselves bear the trace of racial slavery in ways that are obscure and unpredictable.

The history of the ledger animates Morrison's own account of 'the time of slavery' in *Beloved*, though we might also say that racial slavery animates the ledger itself. Indeed, Dussere emphasizes the ledger's crucial (non)relation to the Black slaves who are "excluded from accounting's model of modem selfhood at the same time that they are subject to the accounts, to

[86] Ibid, 48, emphasis mine.
[87] Ibid, 82.

the ledgers that record their purchase and sale." In this way, "slavery is in fact predicated upon the joint calculability of persons and products."[88] The paradox identified here highlights the problem of the Black slave who is both included and excluded from the ledger's structure of selfhood—or more precisely, excluded *on the basis of* its inclusion—insofar as the slave cannot themselves *account* themselves but only *be accounted* for. They cannot have a self, but are constantly policed by those who do have one, marking a distinction by way of negation—one has a self precisely because they are not a slave. As Saidiya Hartman explains, this describes the fungibility of the commodity which, as a matter of mutual interchangeability, renders the slave "an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of other's feelings, ideas, desires and values; and, as property… the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality."[89] The promise of equivalency expresses/conditions (as we know, this is an undecidable decision) the fungibility of the slave-as-commodity, enabling their seamless exchange in slavery's marketplace on the grounds of a joint calculability. Fungibility names the material conditions of what I gestured towards in the previous chapter, through Sara-Maria Sorentino's work, as the analogy of the slave. For Dussere, the materialization of equivalency in this context mark the "economies of slavery" that he cites from Hortense Spillers' iconic essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), where what is brought to light is a linkage between language/grammar and accounting/economy that produces Blackness from slaveness as a commodity, whose flow is accounted for in the ledger at both the level of the plantation and the level of its historical writing post facto.

In my reading of *Beloved*, however, I see the characters as occupying less the position of a slave commodity than that of a slave *debt*, both before and after obtaining 'freedom.'[90] If the

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[88] Ibid 15.

[89] Ibid 21.

[90] I want to name the stakes of this distinction, between commodity and debt, very clearly: Oftentimes in the digital humanities and other fields invested in the history of technology, the notion of equivalency manifests as a broad, often trans-racial critique of commodification qua quantification/digitization under techno-capitalism. Such a critique produces a representation of 'dehumanization' to the effect of: "We have all become slaves." I cannot say much more here besides the fact that to my mind, this does not seem unrelated to the problem of analogy, and as such the representation of Blackness as an absence. I will go over this conundrum in detail in Chapter 3.

figure of the commodity denotes the object of slave economy, then I argue that in *Beloved*, the figure of debt denotes the transformation of this slave economy in the wake of Emancipation. Morrison illustrates the temporal reach of debt most clearly through Stamp Paid, who the reader learns more about after Beloved's appearance in the novel: Here, Stamp is heading to John and Ella's home after having peeked into the home of 124, seeing Denver and the unfamiliar silhouette of Beloved (a moment that I will read more closely later). Stamp wonders if "he had misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed" in light of this encounter, to which we learn the backstory of his name:

> After a disagreeable breakfast he went to see Ella and John to find out what they knew. Perhaps there he could find out if, after all these years of clarity, he had misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed. Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off. He thought it would make him rambunctious, renegade--a drunkard even, the debtlessness, and in a way it did.[91]

Morrison tightly narrates through Stamp a complex tension between the former slave with debt and the signifiers of gift, exchange, and shame that attend it. From the perspective of the reader, there is a palpable ambiguity as to what exactly the nature or status of this debt is, or what it is that could be owed, or what it means to 'owe' at all in this context. Indeed, the clarification around the use of "handed over" expresses an ambivalence in Stamp's claim to the language of "gift," for if Stamp Paid had not "given" his wife and instead killed the master's son, he would have simply gotten himself killed. Indeed, as Sean Capener explains, this is the difference between racial slavery and the *nexum*—an Ancient Roman debt-peonage contract where the debtor would pledge his entire self should he fail to pay off his loan—wherein like the modern indentured servant but unlike the Black slave, "a nexus could not be sold or killed by his owner, and retained formal citizenship."[92] Moreover, the passage reveals an invisible slip between gift

[91] Morrison, "Beloved," 185.

[92] Sean Capener, "The Time That Belongs to God: The Christian Prohibition on Usury in the 12th-13th Centuries and the Making of the Subject of Debt," PhD diss. (University of Toronto, 2021), 16.

and debt: If by definition a gift is something offered without expectation of payment, Stamp Paid's expression of "debtlessness" registers a paradoxical situation where his wife, Vashti, functions on the one hand as a *gift* 'handed off,' yet on the other as a *debt payment*—that is, of a speculative debt, such that "whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off." However, if the right to market relations is unavailable to the Black slave, since to be one is precisely to lack any capacity to owe or own, then so would any tangible debt that could be paid off and resolved into debtlessness in reality. And if it is the case that Stamp's invention of debtlessness comes in the very moment of the gift, which is while he is still enslaved, then Stamp's anxiety regarding the possibility of 'yet another debt he owed' is conditioned by a slippery distinction between gift and debt, and Vashti comes to embody that very slipperiness. The invocation of a debt here is therefore unclear, for the only clear thing is that slaves owe everything without the possibility of amortization.

This is the presence of an absent, indecipherable debt wrapped in the guise of a gift; a classic Derridean aporia whose ambivalence translates into that of Stamp's in the next passage:

> But there was nothing to do with it. Work well; work poorly. Work a little; work not at all. Make sense; make none. Sleep, wake up; like somebody, dislike others. It didn't seem much of a way to live and it brought him no satisfaction. So he extended this debtlessness to other people by helping them pay out and off whatever they owed in misery. Beaten runaways? He ferried them and rendered them paid for; gave them their own bill of sale, so to speak. "You paid it; now life owes you." And the receipt, as it were, was a welcome door that he never had to knock on, like John and Ella's in front of which he stood and said, "Who in there?" only once and she was pulling on the hinge.[93]

From the malaise of debtlessness we see it transform via 'extension,' rehearsing new slips between gift and debt. Here, Stamp's extended debtlessness gifts the runaway with their "own bill of sale," enacting a transformation from debtor to creditor: "You paid; now life owes you." However, the last sentence seems to express the way in which the gift is indeed a debt in disguise, such that Stamp can presume himself John and Ella's creditor, and thus superior to them. As detailed earlier in the novel, Stamp's pride here concerns the way in which "dispensing

[93] Ibid.

with that formality [of knocking on your door] was all the pay [Stamp] expected from Negroes in his debt," insofar as "once Stamp Paid brought you a coat, got the message to you, saved your life, or fixed the cistern he took the liberty of walking in your door as though it were his own. Since all his visits were beneficial, his step or holler through a doorway got a bright welcome."[94] In this sense, debtlessness becomes less an extension of itself than a mark of distinction, between creditor and debtor, debtless and indebted, Stamp and the "Negroes in his debt." Yet Stamp's disappointment (which we can guess is post-Emancipation) in his own claim to debtlessness could only be engaged productively in its extension, which seems to hide away, paradoxically, a certain *indebtedness*. This is a transformation of debt, whose new notion revolves around guilt, shame, and responsibility. Indeed, the extension of this debtlessness reads as nothing but debt in a new form, stunning slip into its opposite.

Dussere calls this form "the debt of honor" which, citing Kenneth Goldberg, describes a practice of gift-giving that was central not only to the (white) Southern "language of honor" but, importantly, to the master-slave relationship itself. Here, Dussere helpfully quotes directly from Goldberg's *Honor and Slavery*:

> The language of the gift was frequently the language of mastery. "Gave" may have been the single most common verb used by planters to describe their relations with slaves. Thomas Chaplin of South Carolina wrote many diary entries in a form echoed by planters throughout the South: "Gave the Negroes a part of the morning to get their com"; "Gave... [potatoes] out to the Negroes for allowance"; "Gave out the cloth"....Masters gave; slaves received.
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> [...] The gift relation was just as deeply imbricated in emancipation as it was in slavery....masters could liberate individual slaves only by awarding them freedom as a gift. Slaves could never purchase themselves in market transactions because they could give nothing to their masters. Masters might permit slaves to purchase themselves, but that was only a roundabout way of giving slaves a valuable gift.[95]

In his claim to debtlessness, and then its extension upon gaining freedom, what we therefore witness in the original passage is Stamp's attempt to inherit this debt of honor, wherein the gift is less an "authentic" or fair offering than the site of a debt that cannot be paid for. But while the

[94] Ibid 172.
[95] Dussere, "Balancing the Books," 66.

debt of honor enables the white southerner to make a racial distinction, it ends up being only the reproduction of Stamp Paid's ineffable slave debt. Hartman's pathbreaking analysis of debt in *Scenes of Subjection* locates this paradox of inheritance in the way the debt of honor is but "a transformation of the same violence from enslavement to emancipation," wherein "the control of blacks… formerly effected by absolute rights of property in the black body, dishonor, and the quotidian routine of violence… were supplanted by the liberty of contract that spawned debt-peonage, the bestowal of right that engendered indebtedness and obligation and licensed naked forms of domination and coercion, and the cultivation of a work ethic that promoted self-discipline and induced internal forms of policing."[96] The distinction between gift/debt thus once again appears undecidable; and this undecidability is mediated, as Hartman demonstrates, precisely in the afterlife of racial slavery. *Beloved* builds on this by highlighting the way in which Stamp's transformation of debt into indebtedness, invisibly mediated in the language of gift-giving, also demands distinction from other Black people in the community, for to give an unanswerable gift to an equal like Stamp tries to do "is to put the recipient in the position of an inferior, of one who cannot give anything and thus must submit."[97] The absent, indecipherable debt of that first passage is hence the first expression of this symbolic and *unpayable* debt which, in the impossibility it sets up, enables a rehearsal—or better, *rememory*—of distinction that occurs alongside the transition from enslavement to emancipation, from master/slave to free/freed.

Unlike Pierre Nora, Morrison would seem to suggest that former Black slaves and their descendants cannot afford to ignore this debt. Indeed, Morrison's writing pitches an ambiguity as to whether Stamp, despite the extension of his debtlessness, can even claim the position of the creditor in the same way that the white Southerner can, symbolized by when he "abandoned his efforts to see about Sethe, after the pain of knocking and not gaining entrance."[98] Moreover,

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[96] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.

[97] Ibid 133.

[98] Morrison, *Beloved*, 199.

Stamp's pride around the formality of (not) knocking is meant to read as naive, absurd even, though there is truth in the speculative debt that he thought he had left in the past, and whose return he fears. How does one settle a debt they had no claim on in the first place? This is the trace of a debt which Stamp feels but can not recognize, much less pay.

It seems then that one cannot provide a decent account for the memory of racial slavery without the language of debt, because the slipperiness of its notion is what grounds the convoluted and nonlinear temporality of racial slavery itself. If the claim to debtlessness (in emancipation) bears the trace of a debt (from enslavement), such that the gift is but an unpayable debt, then the problem of the past/present—that is, how much a trace of the past can or should be "brought into" the present—is ambivalent precisely because time can only be understood in these slippery economic terms. Hence, the story of Stamp Paid highlights this problem of debt which is thus also one of time—of memory and history—in a way that throws contextualization into crisis, because this debt seems to persist from enslavement to emancipation and beyond: an account which can never be settled.

'Rememory' figures this sense of traumatic timelessness that plagues Stamp, and his indecipherable feeling of indebtedness is embodied by Beloved herself. Indeed, it seems no accident that the moment which precedes the telling of Stamp's story is his knocking, a defeated and panicked banging, on the door of 124, and as a result his peek through the window to see the unfamiliar figure of Beloved: the silhouette of another potential debt.

> At the last he [Stamp] banged furiously—disbelieving it could happen. That the door of a house with coloredpeople in it did not fly open in his presence. He went to the window and wanted to cry. Sure enough, there they were, not a one of them heading for the door. Worrying his scrap of ribbon to shreds, the old man turned and went down the steps. Now curiosity joined his shame and his debt. Two backs curled away from him as he looked in the window. One had a head he recognized; the other troubled him. He didn't know her and didn't know anybody it could be. Nobody, but nobody visited that house.[99]

Afterwards, Stamp goes to John and Ella's house to ask if they know who Beloved is, in order to clarify if "he had misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed." Stamp's encounter

[99] Ibid 184.

and non-recognition of Beloved precipitates his intruding thoughts. In the imagery of only her silhouette, Beloved is nothing but Stamp's representation of his own inexplicable feeling of indebtedness—of debt wedded to shame and curiosity—and as such her presence troubles him. External and objective, Beloved *is* a rememory that Stamp encounters, triggering the unbearable trauma of that ever-illusive figure of debt. The community's discovery of Beloved socializes the projection of this traumatic rememory, which leads to them forcefully expelling her from the town, because she represents the past which needed to be forgotten; that is, a debt which needed to be paid off.

Yet as many other readers of *Beloved* have already pointed out, Beloved also seems to symbolize the Middle Passage and lives lost in the process, where her self-narrated section of the novel reading like an account of a slave ship voyage:

> All of it is now   it is always now   there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too   I am always crouching the man on my face is dead   his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men with- out skin bring us their morning water to drink   we have none[100]

Beloved's resurrection and this rememory is of course most traumatic for Sethe, though this passage would suggest that the guilt which crushes Sethe is not only about the daughter she killed but also about the *a priori* event of the Middle Passage. The context of the trauma, we could say, slips from the home of 124 into the hold of the slave-ship. Though Beloved was initially, to Sethe's mind, something of a gift (a "timeless present" in both senses of the phrase), we see in the tail-end of the novel that Sethe feels the weight of the suffering in the slave-ship hold, which nearly crushes her. Indeed, readers witness both women sitting in the surplus pleasure of the death drive, where the satisfaction of self-preservation is never enough, in a constantly heightened tension where expressions of love slip into obsessive claims to possess. For when "Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire," and even as "Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to," Beloved would emphasize her disinterest, and repeat

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[100] Ibid 210.

this past and its unbearable weight: "She said when she cried there was no one. That dead men lay on top of her. That she had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light."[101] Here, the intramural struggle of guilt, shame, and desire is wedded to Beloved's trauma of the slave ship voyage, and the injunction of the latter marks a collision of the past in the present and of the historical in the narrative. The trauma and lives lost from the Middle Passage are registered in their clash in the form of, again, an unpayable debt: For Beloved, there is nothing that Sethe could give that could satisfy her desire, its infinite scalability paralleling the unmeasurable trauma of the Middle Passage she represents; unmeasurable not because it is unquantifiable, but because it is something that no one in the novel (including perhaps Beloved herself) has ever actually experienced. This is exactly how rememory functions in the novel as *nachträglich*: It is the memory of a memory of "you who was not there," a trauma *outside* experience.

Racial slavery thus appears as nothing but a void is the historical archive, expressed by the literal gaps in Beloved's self-narrated passage. Thus, instead of providing an empirical history or a pious fabulation of the Middle Passage, Morrison opts to embody Beloved as its representative medium in order to explicate the impossibility of grasping—that is, taking *hold* of—that event. Each character's encounter with her is therefore one with this traumatic history. Beloved is in this sense the materialization of this (rememory of) history specifically at the level of *representation* and *experience*, whereby the characters experience her as the allegory of an unpayable debt. Hence, where Morrison marks the slippery distinctions between past and present, memory and debt, and racial slavery and emancipation, she is also indexing a fundamental slipperiness between Beloved and one's projected ideas/representations of her, for it is impossible to decipher who Beloved truly *is*: Is she actually Sethe's daughter, or is she just some random girl who has managed to trick Sethe and the rest of the community into thinking she is Beloved, or is she really a resurrected embodiment of those who died in the Middle

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[101] Ibid 240.

Passage? Completely indecipherable, Beloved ends up becoming *nothing but* each character's projected *representation* of their own respective feelings of indebtedness. This is to say, since neither the characters nor readers of the novel can access any authentic or historical idea of who exactly she is, Beloved can only be as she is experienced by others. Beloved both *is* and *represents* an unpayable debt, such that any distinction between the two is essentially pointless. This slippage between *being* and its *representation/experience* is the unfortunate condition for the characters' anxieties and expulsion of Beloved. We might say then that the common appeal to 'lived experience,' if applied to Beloved, would thereby fall flat, insofar as her 'story' is always-already overdetermined by how others experience her; that is, as the story of their own projections.

Whatever Beloved 'was' before her appearance in the narrative is irreversibly substituted by the overdetermining representations of her, such that her relation to the image of an unpayable debt becomes no longer metaphor or symbolic. 'Rememory,' as a memory of a memory of a traumatic scene, therefore also names this slipperiness: The void of the 'unpayable debt' slips from phenomenology (at the level of experience and representation) into ontology (at the level of being). This points to the ontological stakes of racial slavery, whose (a)temporality induces an indistinction between the categories of 'Slaveness' and 'Blackness.' Indeed, the illustration of the supposedly repetitive, excessive, and unproductive nature of Beloved's demands parallels the way in which "blackness is often construed as a desiring in *whose meaning excess, or luxury, signifies a sociocultural impoverishment that is morally bankrupt*," as David Marriot points out.[102] Beloved acts as a sign of the slaves who died on the Middle Passage, as well as of Blackness bar none in an anti-Black world. Beloved encompasses both Slaveness and Blackness in a shared language of debt, highlighting not only what Hartman has called the "non-event of Emancipation," but also the way *debt* mediates an ontological investment. Scholarship in Black studies productively picks up on this problem: Taija

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[102] David Marriott, "On decadence: Bling bling," *e-flux journal 79* (2017), emphasis mine.

McDougall explains that "the being of the slave is thus *being of being structurally derelict* in the amortization of their debt, which is unpayable"[103]; and David Marriot writes that "blackness is the work of a consent that constrains its notion of freedom, which it cannot think or fathom, for it is compelled by the idea that to be black is to be indebted irreparably, ad infinitum."[104] As I have tried to show, Morrison's complex narrative around debt in *Beloved* parallels both of these claims, where the girl Beloved occupies what Frank Wilderson III calls the "structural position of the Black."[105] Beloved represents and clarifies this positioning, where her external and objective relationality to the other characters drives the story as the medium of their terror, and as such their need to "disremember" her.

By placing Beloved in this position, Morrison means to leave readers feeling ambivalent about the novel's conclusion. Any sense of 'success' upon Beloved's expulsion from the town is intentionally meant to feel slippery. We can read this ambivalence as a matter of memory, wherein Beloved is forgotten once driven out by the community, the *violence* of which is signaled by the community's description of Beloved as an "invasion" of the past which needed to be "stomped out," as Dussere explains. Such a reading highlights to readers an ambiguity as to whether Beloved's expulsion should be lauded, insofar as forgetting is circumscribed by "the bourgeois project of self-ownership in which [Morrison's] characters participate," and that "in order for Sethe to re-member herself, Beloved must be disremembered."[106] However, I see a more productive reading in understanding Beloved's expulsion as not simply a matter of 'memory' but instead as one of accounting/exchange. On this account, Beloved's expulsion can be understood as a *gift* from the community to Sethe, but in the guise of a *debt* that hides away a demand for distinction from both Sethe and Beloved. For the community, this is a claim on their honor that is in the same breath a claim on the present by erasing the past (which Beloved

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[103] McDougall, "Plantation Derivations".

[104] Marriott, "The X of Representation," 222.

[105] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*, (Duke University Press, 2010), 128.

[106] Dussere, *Balancing the Books*, 115.

represents). Yet the fact that Beloved, unlike Sethe, is properly expelled from the community suggests that these acts of distinction are of different dimensions. For while the differentiating logic of Southern gift-giving is effectively a claim of superiority, the act of distinction does not necessarily entail erasure of the receiver/debtor; hence, while the community might be offering a gift which is really a debt, Sethe is nonetheless still conceived of as a party in the exchange. Beloved, in contradistinction, would be neither creditor or debtor, but instead the very debt that needed to be paid off in order to settle their respective accounts. She is "the difference that begets [the] difference"[107] between debtor/creditor. This produces a stunning paradox, where *in order to be accounted for in the ledger of the Social, Beloved must be made unaccounted for*. That such a contradiction is brought to light at all (much less in a way that rakes emancipation into the hold of slavery's telos) highlights the deft way in which Morrison narrates her own ambivalence concerning *the price* of freedom.

As I have tried to show throughout this chapter, if the figure of unpayable debt is both an absent *and* present figure in the novel, then Beloved embodies that slipperiness across a number of distinctions throughout the novel: past/present, memory/forgetting, debt/gift, slavery/emancipation, and Slaveness/Blackness. In this light, reading once again at the level of accounting and exchange, Beloved is the sign and embodiment of debt, and as such is both included and excluded—accounted and unaccounted for—in the exchange between debtor (Sethe) and creditor (the town). In order for the debtor/creditor to not slip, the slipperiness of the unpayable debt that is Beloved must be forced out. Yet because this debt is unpayable, the 'success' of the transaction is a bit uncertain. The novel's epilogue comes to express this complex paradox, a few stanzas of which are worth quoting here:

> Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who

[107] McDougall, "Plantation Derivations".

> waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.
>
> It was not a story to pass on.
>
> [...] Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there.
>
> By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.
>
> Beloved.[108]

Saying Beloved "cannot be lost because no one is looking for her" must be understood as radically different from saying she is "never lost," as Sonya Donaldson might. Whereas the latter insinuates the possibility of recognition, the former suggests that the recognition of Beloved's Blackness and the history she brings to rememory is, on the contrary, the very condition for her violent dis(re)membering, such that she erupts into her separate parts, dissolving into the weather, now completely indecipherable. Thinking in terms of memory, the figure of unpayable debt illustrates that Beloved is never lost only because she was always-already alienated from the very category and right to claim "loss" in the first place. Therefore, the community's debt-gift from Beloved, unlike that from Sethe, is a distinction which voices that they are not an unpayable debt like her; which is to say—and this is important—that they are not *Black* like her. To not be Black like Beloved is to say one 'is not' a whole host of things: not forgotten, not the past, not enslaved, not in/a debt. As Sean Capener puts it, this is a claim on "the capacity to freely assume their debts" that is, by way of a negation, also a claim made in opposition to those who do not have that capacity—a "constitutive outside" which "in the present conjuncture... might be termed 'blackness,' 'slaveness,' or [...] 'social death.'"[109] Beloved enables others to know themselves, both individually and collectively, in a common understanding of what they refuse to be: a slave, an unpayable debt. Yet as the 'constitutive outside' of both the town and the novel

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[108] Morrison, *Beloved*, 274.
[109] Capener, *The Time of God*, 18.

itself, Beloved signifies not simply *both* 'Blackness' and 'Slaveness' but more precisely the *slippage* between the two. Racial slavery thrives where it takes hold of this slip, as to re-inscribe itself into the scene of emancipation in the form of a socialized feeling of indebtedness.

My contention is that this model of unpayable debt/indebtedness and distinction, where Blackness becomes figured as *nothing but* a site of negation, illustrates the way modern anti-Blackness works. As *Beloved* shows, the fear of an unpayable debt haunts Black ex-slaves and their ancestors, leading to an act of distinction—between them and Beloved–whose resolution is tentative at best. However, non-Black people are also "paralyzed by the unpayable debt they know themselves to owe," they feel "doomed to endless contemplation of the past," as Dussere points out in the white southern characters in Faulkner's oeuvre.[110] The debt of honor emerges from this anxiety, enabling a form of payment that, as we already know, ends up only re-producing racial distinctions. With this in mind, we might say that the debt of honor covers up not only this anxiety but also the debt's un-payability without fully extinguishing it, instead transforming into a common burden and responsibility across racial lines. The model of honor ends up rehearsing a quasi-racial hierarchy in the guise of a collective responsibility. "Mastery [becomes] defined by self-regulation, indebtedness and responsibility, careful regard for the predilections of former masters, and agility at sidestepping the 'sore toes' of prejudice, anger, and resentment… bore[ing] a striking resemblance to the prostration of slavery," as Hartman writes.[111] In other words, the gift of freedom to former slaves is but a sort of socialization of the slaveowner's tactics of control in the form of 'honor,' 'responsibility,' and 'debt'. Civil society in the afterlife of slavery markets these virtues in the guise of collective responsibilities or antiracist 'human' relationality, the burdens of which end up largely falling on Black people.[112]

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[110] Dussere, *Balancing the Books*, 112.
[111] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 134.
[112] See Axelle Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7.1 (2019), 48: "[R]elationality is inherently not only a position that the black cannot afford or even claim. The structure of relationality is essentially the condition for the possibility of their enslavement. I wonder, therefore, whether our naïve reliance on a type of inherent co-dependence has recently done more harm than good—that is to say, has instead worked to obstruct the very possibility of a positive transformation of our ethical sensibilities."

The consequence is the introduction of a new set of metrics for which judgements between "good" and "bad" Black socio-political actors can be made, as Sara Maria Sorentino points out in her analysis of the problematic 'wage slavery' metaphor.[113] The distinction made at the end of *Beloved*, between the town and Beloved, illustrates the way in which anti-blackness still manifests after emancipation.

I am ultimately concerned with the universal socialization and racialization of the 'unpayable debt' figure after chattel slavery. Insofar as Sorentino's critique of the wage slavery metaphor revolves more generally around the ruse of analogy, where in this instance "the slave can only analogically reappear as theoretical ammunition in a comparative explication of capitalist materiality," I suggest its stakes can be applied also to the anxious invocations of debt explored in this chapter. What *Beloved* affords us to see, I argue, is racial slavery's rupturing of history by blackening the idea of debt into an unpayable one. As such, in the modern world, the anxiety of this unpayable debt—manifesting as guilt, shame, or indebtedness around the violence of history—seems inextricable from non-Black fears of Blackness. Indeed, it would seem that for Morrison, the violent intimacy of debt and (re)memory is nothing less than the time of slavery.

A return to Pierre Nora's notion of the "self-imposed bond," in this light, introduces new racial textures. Recall that this 'bond,' an 'impossible debt,' denotes the way in which historicized memory's democratization and psychologization of responsibility produces the *individualized* (as opposed to *collective*) burden of obligation in the form of an impossible debt that refuses repayment. For Nora, the means by which to avoid this debt is by affirming *lieux de mémoire*; history's gift and excess; wherein the symbolic, material, and functional dimensions of these sites trace lines of collectivity, drawing the historian into relationality with unfamiliar subjects and objects across time and space. However, using Morrison's intervention, we might say that 'collectivity' implicitly registers the debt of honor in the language of "our responsibility,"

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[113] Sara-Maria Sorentino, "The Idea of Slavery: Abstraction, Analogy, and Anti- Blackness" (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2018), 177.

transforming the unresolvable tension of history's debt into a collective burden. If for Nora the traces of collective responsibility name a site of 'true' memory in excess of the logics of history proper, then it would seem that for Morrison, these traces cannot account for the singular *lieu de mémoire* that is racial slavery, for it is precisely the collectivity of the Social, and its imperatives of self-determination and agency, that renders this site excessive and therefore ungraspable. Chattel slavery blackens *lieux de mémoire* into rememories with unbearable trauma. As such, *Beloved* throws the valorization of collectivity (held by Nora in this case but also by much of 'memory' scholarship more broadly) into crisis, revealing the debt of honor which undergirds it, along with its logic of distinction: An invisible line between the non-Black people who can assume their debts and the Black people who cannot—those who can wipe away their shame, and those who are forced to take on everyone else's shame. By assuming debt at only the level of affect and feeling, Nora wishes away the structural figure of an unpayable debt that haunts our strategies of our backwards retrieval, with consequences for scholarship on the memory/history of racial slavery. For such a wish is, in the same breath, the effective un-accounting of racial slavery and paradoxical dis(re)memberment of the lives we sought to recover.

If, as Parisa Vaiziri explains, historiography's notion of historical causality cannot resolve the problem of slavery because "[slavery] conditions the very tools [that historians] have at their disposal to think slavery at all," then such can be similarly said for methods of backwards retrieval centered around *memory*, such as ephemeral archives or *lieux de mémoire*.[114] Vaziri's insight moreover suggests that 'origin' as a framework is limited not simply because it is empirically irretrievable, but because the very attempt to grasp it, even self-reflexively, is overdetermined by the machinations of that event in the last instance. This is to say that racial slavery takes hold of these methods in the present, such that their articulations of memory slip into nostalgia: One desires to forget the "stress of remembering" that Beloved

[114] Parisa Vaziri, "No One's Memory: Blackness at the Limits of Comparative Slavery," *Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach* 44 (2021): 14–19.

characterizes; and in so doing, one leaves to the wayside the very structure of racial slavery—the abstraction and circulation of debt, which mediates the novel's (in)distinctions between master/slave, slavery/freedom, Slaveness/Blackness, individual/collective, past/present. As I have tried to show, Morrison's expression of this unpayable debt constitutes 'the time of slavery' and the way in which our methods are bound by this telos. The past does not carry racial slavery into the present, nor does slavery simply haunt the present—on the contrary, racial slavery is realized in the present precisely in how it organizes the past, and the rhetorical figure of an unpayable debt is what realizes this temporal unity.

Bringing this symbolic dimension to light, *Beloved* in this sense demonstrates that neither historiographical nor memory-driven practices can account for the event of racial slavery, because their use in the present are circumscribed and *indebted* to this very event. The novel registers a collision of Blackness and Slaveness, and the transformation of the slave's non-relation to debt to the ex-slave's inherited debt of honor; amortization is impossible in both instances, suggesting that an engagement with debt—in both its functional and abstract forms—is inextricable from the material-symbolic economics of slavery. Instead of avoiding the anxiety of this debt, the story highlights the epistemological importance of the concept, and how it can be leveraged to productively elaborate the limits of both historiography and memory as accounts of time. Can we really escape the myths and rituals of the ledger in our secular present? It seems that for Morrison, we can only know if we engage racial slavery not simply as an event or object but as an unpayable debt, accessible only through the complex anxieties it induces.

Carrying forward Morrison's engagement with debt and the economics of slavery as central to what we call 'rememory', the next chapter turns to what I see as an interesting moral bind in the digital humanities today, between historical data archiving/visualization scholarship and ethical anxieties regarding quantification, insofar as the latter—revolving around an allegory of some greedy, powerful, and omniscient force—seems to be a manifestation of a broader anxiety around commodification. Specifically, this concerns the 'dehumanizing' effects of the

universal application of the commodity form, whose slippage between corporeality and exchange is seen as an obstruction on human autonomy and self-determination. In this light, connections between quantification, data, and the rememory of racial slavery resonate strongly in particular, centering around the quantifying logic of 'equivalency' that Dussere has pointed out as central to slavery's economics. If it is the case however, as *Beloved* suggests, that the time of slavery involves the slave as not only commodity but also as debt, wherein universal (anxie)ties between body, commodity, humanity, and autonomy are inarguably impossible without the mediating abstraction of a slave alienated from and violated by these categories, then digital memory interventions on chattel slavery are forced to reckon with matters beyond that of commodification. What this means is that 'equivalency', as a condition for the slave's fungibility and commoditization, is perhaps a more complex matter than of simply 'being counted,' because like Beloved, the slave is ac-*counted* for precisely by being un-accounted for. Taking to task the concepts that have been discussed thus far—analogy, loss/absence, slipperiness, accounting/exchange, unpayable debt, etc.—in conversation with Afro-pessimist scholarship and other more recent historical accounts of trans-Atlantic slavery, this next chapter will consider the limits of 'quantification' (qua commodification, qua dehumanization) specifically as an *ethical* frame, or anxiety; and alternatively, what is opened up ethically *and* epistemologically when we understand that the slave served not simply as a commodity but as *money*: as an IOU, both the object and promise of exchange, and as the force of circulation itself. Framing the Black slave around the difference-begetting function of money as such enables a different way of reading racial slavery in the digital archive, which I will demonstrate in a close reading of the *SlaveVoyages* database.

III. Quantification Anxieties

Introduction: 'Markup Bodies'

In her well-known 2018 essay "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads," Jessica Marie Johnson considers the ignored relationship between the history of racial slavery and the contemporary use of data in the digital sphere. By gesturing towards "the role spectacular black death and commodification in slavery's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic archive play alongside the digital humanities' drive for data and a centuries- long black diasporic fight for justice and redress," Johnson attempts to also forward a relation between anti-blackness in the past and present:

> From blogs and journals built on fourth-generation hypertext markup language (HTML) guided by cascading style sheets (CSS) to databases using extensible markup language (XML) and standard query language (SQL), scholars using digital tools mark up the bodies and requantify the lives of people of African descent. These pursuits have not and do not exist in isolation from tensions inherent to constructing histories of bondage. Databases, for example, reinscribe enslaved Africans' biometrics as users transfer the racial nomenclature of the time period (négre, moreno, quadroon) into the present and encode skin color, hair texture, height, weight, age, and gender in new digital forms, replicating the surveilling actions of slave owners and slave traders. There is nothing neutral, even in a digital environment, about doing histories of slavery, and technology has not made the realities of bondage any more palatable or easier to discuss across audiences or platforms. Exploring these anxieties in analog and digital form exposes an unsettled relationship among data, slavery's archive, and the impulse to commodify black life.[115]

In this vein, Johnson explicates a tie between slavery abolitionists and modern historians, wherein both do the paradoxical and complex work of unveiling the reality of black suffering, but having to quantify the black body in order to do so. The structural impulse "to commodify black life," beyond matters of intention, ends up dehumanizing Black people both during and after racial slavery. In this sense, by virtue of their shared logics of equivalency and measurement, these notions of 'commodification,' 'quantification,' and 'dehumanization' for

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[115] Johnson, Jessica Marie. "Markup bodies: black [life] studies and slavery [death] studies at the digital crossroads." *Social Text 36*, no. 4 (2018): 57-79, 59, emphasis mine.

Johnson can be drawn into historical relation to name the transformation of slavery into its afterlife, as well as the ethico-political stakes of digitization in the present.

Taking this further, Johnson reads into the way in which quantification is engaged (or fails to be engaged) in recent digital memory/history projects; specifically, David Eltis and David Richardson's *SlaveVoyages* project, and Vincent Brown's work at the History Design Studio. As it concerns the former, the project's "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database" involved a massive undertaking of data recovery and collection, organized into interactive tables and visualizations. Here, each record in the database today represents a different slave ship, and each field in each record supplies information culled from the ship's original manifest—name of the ship and captain, dates of the voyage, number of slaves on board, place of slave purchase, and landing. In conversation with her historicization of equivalency, Johnson poses a resonating concern regarding the way in which "the questions posed by the researchers emerged from the same set of concerns first articulated during the slavery debates and the work of cliometricians in the 1960s: how to grasp the depth and patterns in the massive trade in human beings and its impact on the making of the Americas."[116] In narrating conversations from a public conference hosted by the College of William and Mary, where the *SlaveVoyages* researchers presented their CD-ROM and its findings, the consequence of historical resonance for Johnson is registered by an ensuing disjunction between the researchers and audience members, wherein "understanding the dimensions of slave ships provided context for the experience of the Middle Passage but could not seem to capture the moral rupture and sense of injustice expressed by people of African descent in the room."[117] In this way, she argues that "the archive of Atlantic slavery—images, numbers, and texts created by slave owners, traders, investors, abolitionists, and the enslaved themselves—haunts efforts to render black people as human," wherein "abolitionists generated content to provoke a hyperemotional response in readers—an excessive reproduction of black death and pain to overcompensate for a dense archive of enslaved integers

[116] Ibid 61.
[117] Ibid 62.

generated across centuries," and "time traveling centuries later, cliometricians' desire to—and failure to—excise emotion from the slavery debates by centering the numbers themselves proved that statistics alone also did not make the history of bondage any easier to digest or the terms of redress more transparent." So to say 'haunted' by this history, *SlaveVoyages* is "corrupted by its creation as part of a project of manufacturing slaves and masters, needed to be defragmented before it could be used."[118] The database's recourse to quantification is in this sense always-already prone to the re-injunction of racial slavery, and as such risks its anti-black effects.

The original tension between "researchers struggling to appreciate the inhumanity of bondage" and "the attendant dehumanization of black lives while also responding to the need for critical, rigorous, and engaged histories of slavery as histories of the present" is for Johnson at least partially accounted for after the conference, as the researchers began a number of new undertakings: A move from CD-ROM format to online database and open-access website; a redesign of the website that reflected a new attention to pedagogy, analysis, and the human dimensions of black life in the era of the slave trade; an inclusion of long-form essays by scholars from around the world explaining the significance of the slave trade to the making of the Americas; lesson plans for K-12 teachers with suggestions on how to use the slave trade database as a teaching tool; a groundbreaking collection of charts, graphs, and maps documenting the movement of Africans throughout the Atlantic; and a new "People of the Atlantic Slave Trade" that includes the names of the enslaved. In this sense, despite the inability of the database to function as "a window into the everyday lives of Africans," these changes, produced in greater conversation with Black scholars, point to significant improvements by forwarding acts of collective knowledge, made with intention and care. As a result, Black women scholars in particular have found the database revealing and empowering in its accessibility and searchability. In particular, Johnson notes the way in which the database evidences "that more

[118] Ibid 65.

enslaved women and children crossed the Atlantic than previously assumed, and insights gained from the advanced computation offered by the database further clarified the significance of African women and youth in different time periods, to different imperial interests, and in different parts of the Americas," which "immediately reshaped debates about numbers of women and children exported from the continent, influencing work on women in the slave trade on the African coast, slavery in African societies, and women in the slave trade to the Americas."

Johnson's own historical analysis on this note, with the help of the *SlaveVoyages* Trans-Atlanctic Slave Trade Database, is especially illuminating. Considering the database is the only archive from which the descendants of slaves can demand "a fully loaded cost accounting," Johnson narrates the way in which enslaved Black women and children were used during these voyages not only as commodities, like the able-bodied adult men, but as *units of measurement*:

> For imperial officials, traders, ship captains, and sailors plying their trade up and down the Atlantic African coast, women and youth represented a negligible remainder and potentially less lucrative demographic. In 1728, Jean-Baptiste Labat described *women and children as fractions of piece d'Inde, the unit of measurement used for enslaved cargo, and used to supplement able-bodied adult men*: "Namely two children for one man or two and a half for one, sometimes three for one or three for two, in this way according to the experience of the Commis and how they look and the goodwill for the interest of the Company…" In slaving conventions along the African coast, in slave traders' desire to transform women and youth into units of measurement, in the symbolic and reproductive labor enslaved African women would be forced to perform, compilers of slave ship manifests participated in the transmutation of black flesh into integers and fractions.[119]

In the context of Johnson's broader effort to "dismantle the residue of *commodification* that is slavery's legacy in the New World," this description of enslaved women and children as *piece d'Inde* themselves would seem to point, ironically, to a different dimension than that of the commodity. For by definition, if a 'commodity' is understood in reference to its use-value, as the *object* of trade, then to be the 'unit of measurement' by which the commodity obtains value is a fundamentally different ontology. The slave in this latter sense instead functions as a commodity for the pure function of exchange: She functions as *money*. This is the difference between, for

[119] Ibid 64.

example, costing $50 and being the $50 bill itself; between being a kilometer-long and being the very metric we call a kilometer. This is a structural distinction that is crucial not only by virtue of logic, but because it introduces a radically different history and understanding of the slave's relation to the ledger. As Sara-Maria Sorentino notes in "The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx's Method," the slave "labors not only in the production of commodities, not only as a commodity, but in the further circulation of labor-power, insofar as the slave regulates between nonwaged work and wage labor, past and present, nature and history, the concrete and abstract, force and form, nothingness and species-being."[120] Sorentino calls modern equivocation to the laborer as "wage slave" into question here, because the slave's economic function as money is of a different order than being one's labor time, in and as commodity. What this suggests is that Johnson's historicization of archival quantification, tied to commodification's similar relation to equivalency and to dehumanization, may therefore be only one side of the slave's story. Whether intentional or not, the other side is registered in her reading of enslaved women and children as *piece d'Inde*, historically indexing the Black slave as not simply numerated through an already-existing logic of equivalency, but taken hold of by the slave trade to function as the very yardstick for measuring equivalency and exchange themselves. As money, the Black slave acts as the material and symbolic *grounds* for universal and collective exchange.

What this points to is a different way to map the 'time of slavery' than as a matter of a 'haunted' history of commodities, or as a matter of modern quantification 'haunted' by past or present commodification, and as such dehumanization. Zakiyyah Jackson reminds us that "too often our concept of anti-blackness is equated with dehumanization, denied humanity, or exclusion," eliding the way in which the plasticity of the Black slave registers her "not so much dehumanized, cast as nonhumans or as liminal humans, nor are black(ened) people framed as [...] simply exchangeable with these nonhuman forms," but rather "as sub, supra, and human

[120] Sorentino, Sara-Maria. "The abstract slave: anti-blackness and Marx's method." International Labor and Working-Class History 96 (2019): 17-37, 32, emphasis mine.

simultaneously[.]"[121] The anti-black ruse of analogy enters the scene here as well, insofar as the condition for such plasticity is the ontological situating of Blackness as nonbeing—as the emptiness of loss, as a blank slate for analogy/projection, as *tabula rasa*. This suggests that if the violence of being rendered commodity is different than that of money, then the latter is also different than that of 'being dehumanized.' In this light, the remainder of this chapter will consider an alternative way of engaging digital memory projects, and specifically the *SlaveVoyages* project. If for Johnson the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database is haunted by the history of commodification and therefore an inability to render palpable the lived experience of Black slaves, then I argue instead that the database registers a different temporality centering around "the *moneyness* of blackness," as Taija McDougall typifies.[122] Taking this as my starting point, this entails a reading of *SlaveVoyages* that exposes a structural problem which conditions quantification and its limits. I contend that this problem is not about 'dehumanization' or the inability for data to access some human dimension. Instead, I find that the violence of quantifying slavery is less about the data themselves than about the way in which its *missingness* become fetishized and named into a *potentiality*—into nothing but the pure and interminable potential for inscription and speculation, even (or perhaps especially) when humanistic/humane/human. The Black slave's *moneyness*, as opposed to its 'commodity-ness,' names the material and symbolic condition of this speculative drive.

The moneyness of the Black slave

It would help to begin by briefly contextualizing this claim concerning the Black slave's money function. Recent historical-philosophical scholarship over the past few years have begun to rethink the popular conception of chattel slavery as simply a labor-driven economy, or the Black slave as simply a labor commodity. Rather than applying the precepts of historiographical

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[121] Wilcox, Lauren. "Black feminism at the end of the world: an interview with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson." International Politics Reviews (2022): 1-11.

[122] Taija McDougall, "Plantations Derivations" (lecture, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, April 4, 2023), emphasis mine.

narrative, of Marxian labor theory, or even of ‘racial capitalist’ framings, such works (oftentimes in conversation with Afro-pessimist concepts especially) expand their historical scope by theorizing slavery’s economics and its impact through its financial dimensions: investing, borrowing, lending, budgeting, saving, speculating, forecasting.[123] Leaning into the financial problematics not only historically index chattel slavery as a precursor to modern structures of finance capital, but also re-think the function of the Black slave as it relates to its ontologization. Retrospectives on the slave trade as such reveal that Black slaves were valuated not simply in their productive labour power but more fundamentally, as Amy Bride explains, in “signify[ing] value *regardless of whether or not it performs physical labour*” by virtue of their racial status—which is to say, their Blackness.[124] As an abstractly valued commodity as such, the Black slave produced by material value insofar as it was materially valuable in and of itself, enabling not simply their commodification but their *collateralization*. This is to say that in the purview of slave economy, the slave was conceived of as especially *liquid*:

> If money needed to be transferred from one location to another, sending a slave on a wagon or as part of a coffle was far easier than transporting physical coins or notes. If an inheritance required dividing, there was a far readier market for slave sales than for land purchases, meaning that the slave can be transformed into cash far quicker than almost any other bequeathed item of similarly significant value. Given the correlation between slave prices and cotton, and the permeance of slavery throughout the Southern states, slaves also represented a recognizable signification of value; a male farm-hand in his mid-twenties from Mississippi would be considered as being the same value as his equivalent in Alabama. The slave body thus becomes a portable, convertible, and exchangeable source of capital, and as such, could take the place of money, or indeed signify the underwriting material, in a number of transactions.[125]

[123] See Sara-Maria Sorentino, "Money, slavery, myth," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (2023); Sean Capener, "The Time That Belongs to God: The Christian Prohibition on Usury in the 12th-13th Centuries and the Making of the Subject of Debt," PhD diss., (University of Toronto, 2021); Taija McDougall, “Plantations Derivations” (lecture, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, April 4, 2023); Tapji Garba, “Notes on Sovereignty, Abolition, and the Politics of the Household” (lecture, Reproduction of Possibility: a colloquium on black critical thought, New York, NY, May 4, 2023). For a Marxist-informed historical account of money’s origins in slavery, see David McNally, *Blood and money: War, slavery, finance, and empire*, (Haymarket Books, 2020).

[124] Amy Bride, "Dead or alive: Racial finance and the corpse-value of the African American slave body," in *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2020): 101.

[125] Ibid. See also Walter Johnson, *Soul by soul: life inside the antebellum slave market* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

What Bride emphasizes here is the liquidity and *monetization* of the Black slave, where the material conditions of the time enabled a valuation on the slave's mere existence backed by its racial status, and as such nothing but their *potential capacity* to perform labor. In other words, valuation of the Black slave—as opposed to, say, the wage laborer—is "based on something that has not yet happened and may not happen in the future, and is therefore entirely intangible at the time of valuation," enabling the slave body to be used by the slaveowner as an underwriting asset for credit applications. This is to say that slaves could be used as in financial transactions as debt or bond securities: "Loans were granted in the understanding that if the debtor were to default on the loan, the creditor would gain ownership of the slave as recompense," effectively allowing the slaveowner to "extract the capital value of the slave body without actually having to put the slave to work."[126] Hence, as Walter Johnson explains, "rather than giving an IOU when they borrowed money, many slaveholders simply wrote out a bill of sale for a slave who would actually be transferred only if they failed to pay their debt." What this overall describes, as denoted earlier, is the Black slave's quantification by virtue of its unique *moneyness*, backed by its racial status in a way identifiable at the level of representation (of skin color) and hedged by the institutionalization of slavery itself; and additionally, the way in which the material value of the slave body is precisely in its im-materiality—as an empty signifier of future potentiality. The Black slave effectively embodies the futural temporality of a promise. For Bride, the raciality of finance in/as the financing of the Black body leads one to horrifying revelation that with the emergence of slave insurance, the slave becomes even more valuable *in death*. "[U]nlike grants of collateralized credit, the value tied up in slave insurance is only extractable once the slave has died; in other words, this is racial finance that only materializes once the black body ceases to materially exist as a living being... Slave insurance thus completely erases the need for the black body to exist in order to be deemed valuable; in fact, the destruction of the black body becomes an act of capital extraction.[127] What this observation points to is not simply the slave body's

[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid, 111.

collateralization but, in an extension of its liquidity, also therefore the specificity of its insurance value, which “neither depends on its being put to use or entered into exchange as a commodity but results purely from the ability of two contracting parties *to imagine what it would have been worth at that imaginary future moment in which it will have ceased to exist*.”[128] Taking heed of racial slavery’s propensities for inheritances, Bride extends this problem trans-historically to anti-Blackness in contemporary times, explaining that “it is not impossible to imagine how the deaths of black bodies (the identities and motives of whom are frequently misrepresented in the popular media) could be seen to hold some form of capital (be this social, economic, or indeed financial) by certain invested parties.”

Yet taking this further, and connecting to insights from the previous chapters, we might posit a unity between the Black slave’s moneyness—as endlessly ‘portable, convertible, and exchangeable source of capital’ into any and every money form—and Blackness’ position as a ‘nothing but’—as analogy, in the empty *potential* for inscription; as the blank canvas of a *tabula rasa*, for the others’ projections and desires. In this connection are also temporal unities of past and present, Slaveness and Blackness, material and symbolic. On this note, we can recall Miriam Posner’s thrill in “show[ing] the possible universe of missing data”; Pierre Nora’s lamentations for “spontaneous memory”; and Sonya Donaldson’s ephemeral archive as “a kind of materialization of possibility” through a “grammar of futurity.” In light of these attempts to *imagine* an ‘otherwise’ or ‘future’ world (to this violent, or anti-Black, one): If the slave’s valuation and function most fundamentally concerns its speculative value for ‘that *imaginary* future moment’—as a collateralized debt instrument or an insurance proceed, and hence functionally as *money* by definition—then might we say that these attempts are themselves implicated in racial finance? What I am hinting at here is a shared allegory of a conversion, wherein Blackness’ future potentiality, whether financial or conceptual, is inextricable from its emptiness (as ‘nothing but’). This is to say that if historiography’s attempts to zone race’s history

[128] Ibid, 112; Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 95, emphasis mine.

is "nonetheless infiltrated by race in the very movement of apprehension," then riffing on Sorentino's statement here, we might say that memory's attempts to imagine a future beyond racial violence are similarly infiltrated by race in the very movement of *speculation*.[129] If the quantification of the Black slave, in the global circuits of trans-Atlantic chattel slavery, is circumscribed by their moneyness as opposed to their commodity-ness, then might this say something about its data-fication in digital archives and in digital space? To pose this question is not to seek an answer nor genealogy. Rather, following Tapji Garba, this is to ask: "What, then, is the *price* of 'possibility'?"[130]

The missingness in *SlaveVoyages*

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database came into fruition following a conversation between historian David Eltis and English professor Stephen Behrednt in 1990, who at the time were working independently on the early and late British slave trades. While historians such as Herebert S. Klein had begun the labor of converting archival data of slave-trading voyages into machine-readable formats had begun in the 1960s, by the 1980s these voyages were still incohesive, organized across sixteen separate datasets—not all of which were trans-Atlantic voyages, nor voyages at all. Hence, following meetings with a number of other prominent historians such as David Richardson, who was doing his own multisource work on the large mid-eighteenth-century Liverpool shipping business, the project received funding in 1993 from the National Endowment for the Humanities, with supplementary support coming from the Mellon Foundation. Over a period of decades, the project standardized the existing datasets (along with unpublished data volunteered by other scholars), collating voyages and converting single-source data sets into multisource equivalents, and adding new information as they came in. By 1999, a CD-ROM of more than 27,000 voyages were published; and with additional surges of information after the fact, the project began the new millennium with further initiatives to

[129] Sorentino, "So-Called Indigenous Slavery."
[130] Garba, "Notes on Sovereignty," emphasis mine.

account for the lack of Latin-American slaving expeditions in the dataset at the time. Finally, following a third major award and subsequent work with programmers, librarians, and designers to digitize and fashion the data into a search interface, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database became available to the public for the first time in 2008 with the launch of an open access website, titled *SlaveVoyages*. In addition to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, the site also has come to include an Intra-American Slave Trade Database—which provide "insight into the *experiences* of those who survived the Middle Passage across the Atlantic and were forced to board subsequent vessels soon after arriving at a port in the Americas"[131]—as well as two other "People of the Slave Trade" databases that detail information on the slaves themselves: The African Names Database, which includes the slaves on-board Middle Passage ships in the last 60 years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade; and the Oceans of Kinfolk Database, which includes the 63,000 slaves trafficked to New Orleans (intially documented at the time by ship captains, following its requisition by US Congress in the "Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves" of 1807). These recent undertakings in particular, added to the site in recent years, can be understood as within the scope of a broader 'humanizing' effort to acknowledge the 'experiences' of the enslaved which index—and are indexed by—its data points.

Today, with more than 36,000 voyages, each with up to 274 attributes, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database in particular estimates to record around two-thirds of all slaving voyages that sailed between 1514 and 1866. It is further estimated that the database's documented voyages included the trade of around 12.5 million slaves, where the vast majority of which (10.7 million) disembarked in the Americas specifically. The database's interface is interactive and user-friendly, filterable across a number of variables—such as year range, itinerary, dates, captain and crews, etc.—and translatable into summary statistics, tables, data visualizations, interactive maps, timelines, or timelapses. Furthermore, the site supplements the database itself with additional sections: 'Understanding the Database,' which breaks down

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[131] Jane Hooper, "SlaveVoyages Introduction: A Retrospective and What's Next," September 30, 2023, https://www.slavevoyages.org/blog/slavevoyages-introduction.

background information and methodology; 'Estimates,' which includes separate interface for querying estimates on the database's seven imputed variables (Flag IMP/National carrier, Slaximp, Slamimp, Year IMP, Modified tonnate, and place where a voyage began, and embarked or disembarked captives); 'Essays,' which includes a number of essays from various authors who analyze and transform the database's records into historiographical claims about the slave trade; and 'Edit Database,' which allows users to create an account to the *SlaveVoyages* website to supply and/or revise existing information in its database(s). Understood generally, and in addition to the other databases on the site, the central goal of the database's publication as a website in this way is to make its records legible to the public in a variety of settings, whether by other researchers who want to further their own scholarship or make their own additions/edits to the database; by educators and students looking to supplement their teaching/learning with the website's resources, which includes image galleries and lesson plans; or simply by any member of public that would like to explore, engage in, or contribute to the history and understanding of the trans-Atlantic and intra-American slave trades. Taken together, the project's interface with the public is conceptualized as a collaborative, international, and multi-disciplinary effort, open and welcoming to new ideas and changes, such that the documentation of this history, while extensive, is always-already a work in progress. As Daniel B. Domingues da Silva writes, in a recent *SlaveVoyages* blog post titled "What's In a Name? Or How SlaveVoyages Got Its Name and Why It Matters," the project's name has undergone many changes over time through the input of both direct and indirect collaborators; and similarly, the "geographic expansion" of the its records "will only continue in the future," where "thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities the database will soon be able to cover the traffic across the Indian Ocean and parts of maritime Asia. Who knows what will come next? The Pacific? Riverine trade?" Hence, *like* the slave trade being documenting, the *SlaveVoyages* name too has "a history of decisions, changes, modifications, adaptations, and trials and errors common to any other project," whose "origins trace back to the late 1960s, so we are not

generally opposed to changes"—and as such, Domingues da Silva writes, "we are not generally opposed to changes… We are listening and hope you will join the conversation."[132]

While rhetorical and if anything stylistic, the connection that is drawn—between the history which the project is tracking, and the history of the project itself—is notably self-reflexive, indexing its own infrastructural changes into the history which it seeks to inscribe. *SlaveVoyages*, and its international network of collaborators, is itself a historical actor, implicated in the history it writes into being and vice versa. As previous chapters have tried to show, 'memory' is defined by its self-reflexivity. Yet memory, for precisely this reason, also indexes a certain sense of a 'beyond' documented history: Hence, Eltis writes that "the major aim of this web resource is to facilitate and stimulate new research on the slave trade, the *implications of which reach far beyond the slave trade itself*," insofar as it gestures towards "new assessments of the social as well as the economic role of the slave trade in the regions where the slave voyage originated."[133] We can read this claim to self-reflexivity and historical contingency in a number of 'traces' throughout the website—whether explicit like its list of funding sources, or implicit like the dates that are included for each essay/blog post.

In this light, various allusions to the database's *limitations* can be understood as particular traces, which I find can be categorized into two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, there are explicit statements around *empirical* limits. As it concerns trans-Atlantic voyage data, the sheer diversity of the database's sources makes it such that "[w]e can hardly expect that reports on voyages made several thousand miles—as well as several months—apart, often in different languages and under different bureaucracies, each with a separate set of official procedures to follow, to always generate perfectly consistent information." This leads to inconsistencies in the multisource dataset that, while technically removable, should not be fully eliminated, as this would "impos[e] an order on the historical record that anyone who has

[132] Daniel B. Domnigues da Silva, "What's In a Name? Or How SlaveVoyages Got Its Name and Why It Matters," April 7, 2023, https://www.slavevoyages.org/blog/whats-name.

[133] David Eltis, "Methodology," SlaveVoyages, 2018, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about#methodology/introduction/0/en/, emphasis mine.

visited the archives… knows does not exist," Eltis notes.[134] Moreover, the unit of record for both the trans-Atlantic and intra-American datasets is the *shipment* (i.e. a single maritime journey of one vessel); which, while generally helpful for quantifying the slave trade, "offers no good way to capture statements or reports from colonial officials that described broader patterns in the slave trade, such as declarations that in a certain decade some total number of enslaved people arrived in a particular place," Alex Borucki and Greg O'Malley note. In the context of the intra-American dataset, the shipment unit's focus on maritime voyages effectively limits coverage of overland slave trading—a common yet rarely logged part of intra-American traffic "crucial to understanding captive experiences and the formation and dislocation of enslaved populations."[135]

On the other hand, there are allusions to *humanistic* limitations, wherein the data alone unfortunately cannot render the 'experiences' accessible. Borucki and O'Malley as such state that while "compiling such a database is a worthwhile undertaking," they also "remain painfully aware that the sources that make such quantitative analysis possible are dehumanizing, tallying people in ledgers as trade goods alongside barrels of sugar and crates of textiles." They ask that users thus "also consult other types of information about the slave trade—such as survivors' accounts, cultural studies, and more qualitative analyses," and remain "welcome [to] suggestions for how to give this database project a more human touch that highlights enslaved people's perspectives despite the source-based challenges."[136] More broadly, the "People of the Slave Trade" databases function to highlight this limit as well, wherein the unit of record is not the shipment but instead the *name*, whether of the enslaved or the enslavers. 'Naming' as such, discursively entangled with similar gestures of 'acknowledging' and 'recognizing,' is metonymic of the more general claim to self-reflexivity that these limitations express. This is to say, once again, that *SlaveVoyages* is not simply a historiographic intervention but a digital memory

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Alex Borucki and Greg O'Malley, "Methodology," SlaveVoyages, 2018, https://www.slavevoyages.org/american/about#methodology/0/coverage/1/en/.

[136] Ibid.

project, insofar as it explicates its self-reflexiveness and announces a collective effort to 'humanize' its objects of study.

Both empirically and humanistically, then, we might say that both types of limitations are two sides of the same 'missingness' that is made transparent in *SlaveVoyages*, or any work of digital memory writ large. There is a quantifiable set of missing data on the one hand, and an unquantifiable set of missing data of *lived experience* on the other; both of which emphasize the limits to understanding the slave both empirically and humanistically. Yet in both cases, it is precisely from these invocations of missingness that the project's methodological and epistemic interventions comes forth: its collaborative and participatory structure, its openness to change, its globality and multi-disciplinarity, and its facilitation for new research on and beyond the slave trade—all of which convert data missingness into the future potential for 'new geographic expansions.'

If we take its self-reflexivity to entail this narrative, then at least rhetorically, the database seems to eerily express the racist trope of the 'X': Blackness as *nothing* but its *potential* for inscription and differentiation. As pointed out in the previous section, the money-form of the Black slave is underwritten by the same allegory. My contention, however, is that these similarities are not simply rhetorical. Indeed, we can engage moneyness through the *SlaveVoyages* website directly, where in the methodology section of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Eltis elaborates on the dataset's use of a "Sterling cash price (of slaves) in Jamaica" (JAMCASPR) data variable to compute a "price of slaves" variable, "used to track the price paid for slaves in the Americas as they were sold from the vessel." Because "prices for human beings in the Americas were subject to as many influences as were prices in any other market"—key factors including the characteristics of the person being sold, the distance between slave markets in the Americas and Africa and the price of the captive in Africa—this variable "attempts to adjust for several of these factors so that the underlying price trends become apparent to the user of Voyages." But how does this adjustment, and the derivation of price,

work exactly? Or better, what categories make this adjustment possible? Eltis summarizes the process like so:

> In most cases the data are taken from the slave traders' accounts and correspondence. Our first goal was to ensure that we recorded a single category of captive – what was frequently referred to at the time as "a prime male". Second, we adjusted that price for the price differential between the market in which the slave was actually sold and the price in Jamaica. Thus, if the captive was sold in one of the eastern Caribbean islands we would make a small adjustment upwards to reflect the ten extra days sailing time it would take to reach Jamaica. Third, we converted all prices into pounds sterling. What we did not do was to express the price in constant pounds (adjusted for inflation) – in other words, in real terms. This variable is thus based on archival data.[137]

In light of the historical outline earlier in this chapter concerning the Black slave's money-form, each of these three 'goals' named by Eltis here become complicated. Firstly, the creation of a "single category of captive" as "a prime male" elides Jessica Johnson's elaboration that the women and child slaves, unlike their male counterparts, were not only priced but also used by slave traders as pricing instruments—units of measuring value—themselves. Once again, this names their particular money-form, insofar as these slaves were used as the (racial) difference which begets (priced) difference. While the fungibility of the slave did effectively render their Blackness an "undifferentiated identity" as Hortense Spillers points out, this is only by virtue of the fact that the pricing mechanism by which they become undifferentiated is conditioned by a preceding *distinction* between a 'prime male' slave and a woman/child slave. Statistically adjusting to a single (male) category, as to un-differentiate the gendered distinctions between slaves, therefore must *a priori* unthink the idea of her money-form, and how that might affect her pricing.

Secondly and relatedly, the described adjustments made on inter-market price differentials indirectly suggests an over-emphasis on the 'overseas' nature of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to explain slave pricing. In Eltis and Richardson's co-authored article "Slave prices, the African slave trade, and productivity in the Caribbean, 1674–1807," wherein a fuller

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[137] David Eltis, "Methodology: Resistance and Price of Slaves," SlaveVoyages, 2018, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about#methodology/resistance-and-price-of-slaves/19/en/.

elaboration of the price derivation is provided, the authors note that producing the price series would require three specific adjustments: "(a) adjusting or discounting credit prices to allow for changing credit conditions on slave purchases; (b) converting mean cash prices for mixed groups of slaves into prime male equivalents; and (c) adjusting slave prices in different American markets to what they would have been in Jamaica."[138] While (b) and (c) are re-elaborated on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database on the *SlaveVoyages* website, (a)—the adjustment/discounting of credit prices—is notably not included. Additionally, to simply make a numerical adjustment or discount for changing terms of credit cannot engage the material relation between the credit system and the Black slave *as itself a credit instrument*. As Bonnie Martin explains, an analysis of recorded mortgages in Southern US states in the 18th to 19th centuries reveals that southerners used slaves as collateral to "raise large amounts of cash and credit" so they could "expand their holdings in slaves more quickly because they did not have to save the entire purchase price before making their acquisitions."[139] Similar to how homes are used to today, slaves were valuable capital assets that could be acquired using a purchase-money mortgage; though unlike houses, slaves were mortal, and thus loans could be overcollateralized such that slaves who died could be easily substituted by others. Moreover, the use of slave as collateral was international: "In Barbados, Brazil, and South Africa, where slavery was ended by a compensation scheme rather than war, public debates about the economic costs of emancipation included an accounting of the use of human collateral"[140]; and people were using and accepting slaves as collateral "at all the overlapping levels of finance that made up the colonial and national economies [...] from international experts in financing the cotton crop like Alexander Brown & Sons, to factors and bankers in port cities[.]"[141] In this light, it would be

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[138] David Eltis and David Richardson, "Slave prices, the African slave trade, and productivity in the Caribbean, 1674–1807," in *Slavery in the Development of the Americas*, ed. David Eltis, Frank D. Lewis, Kenneth L. Sokoloff (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 185.

[139] Bonnie Martin, "Slavery's invisible engine: Mortgaging human property," *The journal of southern history* 76, no. 4 (2010): 818.

[140] Ibid., 819. In Barbados, for example, there is evidence that Barbadians were buying slaves on credit since at least the seventeenth century. See: Russell R. Menard, *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados* (Charlottesville, 2006);

[141] Ibid., 864.

remiss to not, for example, attribute the steady increase in Caribbean slave price throughout the 18th century—which Eltis, Richardson, and Lewis attribute to "productivity improvements"[142]—as affected (if not fundamentally conditioned) by the mortgaging of the slave trade. Eltis et.al's so-called adjustment on credit, as well as their recourse to "productivity" to explain slave pricing, thus seems to show that "[t]he rich historiography on transatlantic networks of trade and marketing between the Americas and metropolitan centers also may have steered the conversation and research away from local finance," as Martin suggests.[143]

Taken together, these adjustments—of mixed group slaves into 'prime male equivalents,' and of credit conditions in general— both efface the *moneyness* of the Black slave which precedes its valuation by pound sterling. To compute a 'price of slaves' variable based on the JAMCASPR data variable ('Sterling cash price (of slaves) in Jamaica') is thus both theoretically *and* historically suspicious. The scholarship on moneyness as outlined would instead seem to suggest that the 'price of slaves' variable itself be measured 'in slaves.' This is aporetic to say the least, wherein the slave—as itself a unit of measurement—constitutes an absence in the database's quantification of its price series, and as such an absence at the level of history. "[T]he mortgaging of people has slipped from our collective memory and the history of slavery," as Martin writes.[144] Indeed, this slippage from memory/history would seem to be not the product of un-careful historiographical practices but rather *constitutive of* slave mortgaging's logics:

> Though slaves knew that anyone in their family might be mortgaged, they rarely knew with certainty when or which person became collateral and to which creditor. A lender might foreclose on human property long after recording the mortgage, making it difficult for the families of those seized to link the traumatic memory of a separation with the

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[142] David Eltis, Frank D. Lewis, and David Richardson, "Slave prices, the African slave trade, and productivity in the Caribbean, 1674–1807 1," *The Economic History Review* 58, no. 4 (2005): 680. Eltis et.al write: [O]ver the period 1674–99 to 1780–1807 the ratio of the price of slaves to the price of sugar rose increased 56.5 per cent, from 0.719 to 1.125, or by 0.4 per cent annually. The slave trade meanwhile reached its all-time high point in the final years of the eighteenth century, with, on average, more than three times the number of slaves arriving in the Caribbean in the period 1780–1805 than in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Rapid expansion of output in terms of both value and volume, when combined with rises in prices of inputs (in the form of slaves) relative to prices of outputs (in this case, sugar), are strongly suggestive of productivity improvements.

[143] Ibid., 857.

[144] Martin, "Slavery's Invisible Engine," 820.

> mortgage that caused it. When loans were repaid, there were no memory-triggering events... The time lag between the recording of mortgages and foreclosures, when added to the dispersed nature of the mortgage recording process, made this financial engine relatively invisible, allowing potentially large economic and human consequences to remain unrecognized.[145]

What Martin describes here is what I have referred to earlier, through Hartman, as the time of slavery: A speculative unity between the material conditions of the slave trade in the past and the historical recovery of those conditions in the present. Slavery's credit system as such manages to un-account itself in the ledger of history, retroactively obfuscating the money function and ontological being of the Black slave who, as such, slips into a 'missingness.' As a result, the slave cannot be acknowledged by the database, because doing so would otherwise render the latter's price variable empirically obsolete. We can frame this as a problem around 'memory': If the trade's quantification relies on various adjustments in order to render the data *legible* to its user, then this gesture of legibility is also the effective 'forgetting' of the racial credit system, which underwrites the innumerable uses of the slave—as commodity, as laborer, as collateral, as debt, as money, *ad infinitum*. This, I contend, is the price of applying quantification for the sake of slavery's archival memory. And fundamentally, this paradox once again reveals an anachronistic and deeply inextricable relation between the missingness of the *SlaveVoyages* databases and the moneyness of the Black slave.

What this names is a figure—the Black slave *as* money—which cannot be reflexively acknowledged by *SlaveVoyages*, for to do so is to throw the database's legibility into crisis. Guided by slavery's financial dimension and its logics of historical effacement, the money-form of the Black slave is thereby *necessarily* missing from the dataset, quantified and adjusted into an absence for the sake of legibility. The transformation of the Black slave into recognition as such is endlessly deferred. What this reveals then, perhaps provokingly, is that while the project is driven by a desire to understand the slave trade, it is also in the very futility or deferral of ever fully understanding slavery that the project can stake self-reflexive claims to public

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[145] Ibid.

participation, open collaboration, multi-disciplinarity, and research funding. The *missingness* of the slave trade, whose unit of record is the Black slave, is hence the project's necessary pre-condition, from which emerges not only *SlaveVoyages* itself but also its global network of historians, librarians, researchers, institutions, users, and funders. Put simply, the invisibility of the Black slave—that is, as money, or collateral—makes its quantification doable, and makes *SlaveVoyages* possible. To make this connection is not to say that *SlaveVoyages* is unethical or not worthwhile or 'wrong'; rather, it is to gesture towards the paradoxical way in which both the financial and ethical grounds for this work, despite *and* because of its self-reflexivity, is anachronistically inscribed by its very object of study: racial slavery.

A final reflection

As I have tried to explicate throughout this thesis, the paradox which plagues self-reflexivity as a mode for engaging anti-Blackness names what I consider to be the logic of 'the time of slavery.' To theorize this 'memory' requires a different engagement with its concepts that orient scholarship in the now. As it concerns *SlaveVoyages* specifically, pointing to moneyness means that the quantification of the Black slaves in its dataset cannot be understood in metaphors to commodification and dehumanization. Instead, it necessitates that we define quantification's consequences in how its limitations are *taken up*: That is, how quantification will always leave gaps in knowledge, and how these gaps become *imputed, speculated, or capitalized on into possibilities* for future development. To recall David Marriott's insight, the aporia of the X emerges in how the very possibility for further knowledge—on racial slavery, and on the slave themself—is indistinguishable from the endless deferral of this knowledge. Accordingly, this is to say that the consequence of quantification, as *SlaveVoyages* demonstrates, derives from its call for a participatory and inclusive mode of doing history, as to slip researcher into user and vice versa. The reflexivity of this call is preconditioned by the assumption that racial slavery's history will always require its missing gaps that, I contend, are always-already racialized. For such absences, in the now, necessarily un-recognize the Black

slave in order to produce the project's globality and multidisciplinarity, or at least the romantic image of such descriptors. The expansive imaginaries that motivate slavery's digital archives therefore cannot account for an anti-Black imaginary that functions beyond clear word.

The reflections throughout this thesis—from Donaldson's ephemeral archive, to Morrison's *Beloved*, to *SlaveVoyages'* missing gaps—can hence be distilled into this: If memory's self-reflexivity is indeed structured by its impossibility, then the affirmation of this contradiction is not a freeing gesture for those who seek to understand anti-Blackness; rather, reflexiveness' sublation of this problem into a possibility is precisely that which re-introduces racial slavery into the folds of the present, for such assertions of contradictions, slips, paradoxes name, if anything, the very condition of anti-Black antagonisms across the structures and categories of economy, law, and culture. *Anti-blackness shatters history and memory alike*—and even when the broken pieces are glued together into a self-aware memory, whether analog or digital, its future possibilities are nonetheless circumscribed by a figure whose Blackness renders it *nothing but* the opportunities it bears. Indeed, this is the temporality and violence of a promise.

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