

## *Race, Capital and Violence*

This essay takes its departure point from Alessandra Raengo's statement, who claims that "race is a form of appearance of capital".<sup>1</sup> It is developed through an examination of Fred Moten's and Raengo's arguments, which will provide a basis for a current analysis of black subjectivity. More specifically, this essay focuses on black masculinity in the American gangster culture, as depicted in the HBO series *The Wire*, which, through the use of Moten and Raengo's terms, could be understood as a form of appearance of capital today. The central themes which will serve the basis for the discussion of formation of this subjectivity will be *capital* and *violence*, themes that have great importance in a discourse about slavery and blackness, and thus could be relevant for a current analysis as well.<sup>23</sup>

In *Reification, Reanimation, and the money of the Real* Alessandra Raengo produces an argument that interweaves ideas of capital with notions of race. Her claim that *race is a form of appearance of capital* is based on the notion of "theoretical realism" in the Atlantic slave trade. This means that "Imaginative or speculative entities produced by social agreement, such as insurance value or a slave cargo, could be granted a 'real' existence". As part of the process of capital accumulation the slave body, just as any other commodity, becomes a form of money. Yet, it functions in a double manner: It is both the actual slave body (which can be sold and bought or used in the production of other commodities) and the virtual slave body (as a form of insurance or a future investment) that stand for capital.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Raengo, who straight-forwardly begins her discussion with the production of the slave through capital, Moten chooses to open his analysis of the slave as commodity through a dialog with Saidiya Hartman on the reproduction of aunt Hester's beating scene from *Narratives of the life of*

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandra Raengo, "Reification, Reanimation, and the Money of the Real", *World Picture 7, Distance* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the occupation with the American gangster culture in this essay should not be seen as a reaffirmation of black stereotypes nor read as a generalization about black performativity, but an attempt to view this specific culture and its subjects through an examination of the systems of accumulation and control in which it operates.

<sup>3</sup> Choosing to avoid the political discourse and the critical problems around black representation, this essay will only use excerpts of dialogue, detached from a wider narrative or context. This way, it would be possible to treat them not as evidence in the confirmation of the aforementioned subjectivity, but as cultural texts through which to reflect on the production of lower- class black masculinity.

<sup>4</sup> Raengo. "Reification, Reanimation, and the Money of the Real", 2.

*Fredrick Douglass*. Refusing to reproduce what she identifies as a primal scene, Hartman discusses this scene of violence as the core principle for the formation of the slave:

*Douglass established the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement "I was born"... The terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another.* <sup>5</sup>

The importance of the primal scene for Moten lies exactly in Hartman's refusal to reproduce it, for this illusionary refusal makes the violent spectacle visibly present, even if only as a reference, in every scene that follows. Moten's concern here is in the significant influence this primal scene might have on black performativity as he rhetorically poses the question of "whether the performance of subjectivity... always and everywhere reproduces what lies before it".<sup>6</sup> The repression of the primal scene of subjection, the origin for a black performance of subjectivity, is then as important as its inevitable reproduction because, as Moten claims, "the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production."<sup>7</sup> Throughout Moten's writings, it is those unspeakable yet inescapable scenes which are bound to find themselves echoed and repeated through the every-day ritualized demonstrations of black performance in generation to come.

Following Moten, I wish to now shift the attention to the subject matter of this essay - black masculinity in gangster culture - and ask in which ways does the violence of authority in current scenes of subjection shape and produce this specific performance? Can we use Moten's and Raengo's ideas of the formation of subjectivity through violence and capital as a ground for an exploration of the ways in which these ideas come in to play in the formation of black subjectivity today? Instead of looking at violence and capital as two different pivotal components in this discussion, I wish to view the question of violence *through* notions of capital.

In order to begin to unpick and re-link issues of capital and power as they manifest themselves in the aggression of authority, it will now be beneficial to examine one of the key scenes from *The Wire* which contains a dialog in which a chess 'tutorial' is interwoven with a critical reflection on the unspoken rules and conduct of the drug dealing world (AKA The Game):

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Moten, "The Resistance of the Object", in *In the break: the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Moten, *In the break*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Moten, *In the break*, 5.

*D: See this? This the kingpin, a'ight? And he the man. You get the other dude's king, you got the game. But he trying to get your king too, so you gotta protect it. Now, the king, he move one space any direction he damn choose, 'cause he's the king. But he ain't got to hustle. The rest of these motherfuckers on the team, they got his back. And they run so deep, he really ain't gotta do shit. These right here, these are the pawns. They like the soldiers. And they like the front lines, they be out in the field.*

*W: So how do you get to be the king?*

*D: No, it ain't like that. See, the king stay the king, a'ight? Everything stay who he is.<sup>8</sup>*

Although this revealing dialog deals with the specific politics of *The Game*, it cannot be understood separately from today's economic framework, and from this wider perspective it accurately lays out the elements which form the politics of capital and power and the ways in which they operate. The figure of the king clearly signifies the possession of both wealth and domination (and perhaps the impossibility of attaining one without the other) and stands in opposition to the pawns, which only function as a means of achieving and maintaining the king's superiority (an issue that I will return to later on). Putting aside this rather Marxist critique of the division of labour in a capitalist society as well as the unachievable desire to someday "be the king", it is now possible to address to the mechanism of power and authority through Mbembe's idea of Necropolitics.

Departing from Foucault's theories of biopower, in which he addresses the operation of power on and through individuals' bodies as a vehicle for asserting social discipline, Mbembe argues that governmentality does not only function in the regulation of living bodies but also through exercising the right to kill. Modern wars are not, as our collective imagination suggests, outside the politics of the social realm, which is supposedly constituted by a social agreement based on a shared notion of reason. Through a division of humanity into racial groups and subgroups, while producing laws of exception, emergency, and fictionalised enemies, the modern state claims control over the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and population."<sup>9</sup> Race, in this context, refers to both historic and current means of state control over life and death, which is informed historically by notions of otherness and inhumanity associated with non-western cultures: "In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous function of the state."<sup>10</sup> It then becomes impossible to consider issues of authority as detached from notions of violence and racism - physical

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<sup>8</sup> *The Wire*, HBO, Season 1 episode 3, aired on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", in *Public Culture*, Winter 2003 15(1), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics", 17.

power is the way in which the state demonstrates its control through its governmental institutions: the law and the police. Acts of aggression and physical abuse are firmly constituted in what can now be clearly discussed in the social sphere as a field of war.

Can we discuss the constitution of racial violence as a type of primal scene that echoes in its reproduction through black masculine performance? In order to do so we must understand the formation of this subjectivity as a *reaction* to the violence performed in current scenes of subjections:

*C: Don't matter who did what to who at this point. Fact is, we went to war, and now there ain't no going back. I mean, shit, it's what war is, you know? Once you in it, you in it. If it's a lie, then we fight on that lie. But we gotta fight.*<sup>11</sup>

Referring to war as something that is inevitable in as much as it is sought-after, this statement sheds light on the subject position the black man inhabits in the battlefield of power relations in his immediate environment - the street, the Ghetto, the neighbourhood. Thinking about Mbembe's description of sovereignty as "exercising of the right to kill" in terms of the personal rather than the political, we can see how individuals become subjects through the reclamation of that right. Becoming a subject in a violent power structure in this context means to become an active participant in a system which regulates and exercises its control through force. Just as, for Mbembe, war is not outside of the social agreement, the practice of violence for black subjects is not outside the jurisdiction of the law, but its direct continuation. Although it can be seen as a practical defence strategy, this response is deeply grounded as a core principle in the constitution of subjectivity itself. Sovereignty as the right to kill in the form of a black reclamation of power is the historic requisite response to the perpetual subjection of the black body to violence, which expresses itself in the gang culture both as a refusal to oppression and a resistance to threat. The reactionary performance of demonstration of power cannot be seen as anything other than the reversed subsuming of primal scenes of brutality into the ritualized field of the everyday.

Whether this threat is in the form of the police or competing gangs, the notion of threat is important in this matter as it grants the legitimisation to kill or use physical force.

If this subject position is constituted around the notion of power, then its biggest threat is not death's constant shadow but the expression of weakness or fear. This can be seen in another dialogue excerpt from *The Wire*:

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<sup>11</sup> *The Wire*, HBO, Season 3 episode 12, aired on 19th December 2004.

*P : No doubt you carrying a full clip. But what you gonna do when you're sitting at the end of the table? Once you're there, you got to hold it down.*

*M : Sound like one of them good problems.*

*P : Prison and graveyards, they full of boys who wore the crown.*

*M : Point is, they wore it.<sup>12</sup>*

The desire to overcome the fear of death, resisting its rules by fully accepting its presence, is manifested in the will to show no sign of weakness in the attempt to “wear the crown”. As discussed before, this crown metaphorically stands for both obtaining respect and status as well as the accumulation of wealth.

Bell Hooks discusses the specific characteristics of black masculinity in the American Gangsta culture through an historic context that might elaborate on the important interweaving of race and capital in this matter. Hook’s argument is constructed around the notion of the excessive impact white masculinity had on the formation of the black man. This had a twofold effect - on one hand, a profound patriarchal impulse for caring and providing for the family, which was previously denied of the slave, yet on the other hand the adaptation of notions of domination within the family structure, which was expressed through brute force, as observed in the master’s behaviour.

On the economic level, hooks observes a shift in black men’s attitude towards work and money which has great significance for the understanding of the development of gangster culture: the criticality toward notions of capitalism and wealth which prevailed in black radical discourse of the 60’, along with a disappointment from the failed attempt of gaining true equality in the workplace and in paid wages, has changed into a more tangible desire for making money. Within a capitalistic environment, the old values in which the male as head of the family was respected for the hard work and integrity he had put into his job, has transformed into new notions of patriarchy in which the working man was perceived as a cheap worker, who cannot proudly provide for his family. In the unequal workplace black men felt like they could not compete with their white associates in assuming higher or even similar positions, but by shifting the attention from the work to capital itself they could now stand a chance. Money has become the sole signifier for individual success regardless of the way it was earned and was the way for receiving respect from the family and the community and thus a sense of personal worth. If “money is the maker of successful manhood” and the means for obtaining wealth do not matter, as long as they do not require assuming the

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<sup>12</sup> *The Wire*, HBO, Season 3 episode 6, aired on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2004.

humiliating position of hard work.<sup>13</sup> The choice of earning as much money in lesser effort is creates a fertile ground for the acceptance and glorification of drug dealers, gamblers and hustlers. In this sense, violence and capital become inseparable: on a practical level, violence is a necessary vehicle for the accumulation of capital in Ghetto life. On a theoretical level, the two elements together serve as central components in the formation of subjectivity for the contemporary black man.<sup>14</sup>

Applying the terms used by Reango, Moten and Hartman to discuss the formation of the slave to black manhood in gangster culture today, we can see that this subject as well is the product of new scenes of subjection in a late capitalist production. Unfortunately, this process of attaining subjectivity as an active autonomous individual in society is at the same time a process of inescapably becoming an object within the structure of the neighbourhood:

*S : You know that if you call the shot, we at war. We at war man. Thing about turf man, it aint like it was. I mean you ain't gonna pay no price of buying no corners.*

*A : Since when do we buy corners? We take corners!*

*S : Man you gonna buy one way or another. Whether it's with the bodies we done lost or you're gonna lose time in the joint... I mean you gonna get some shit in this game, but it ain't shit for free.<sup>15</sup>*

In this dialogue, it is most evident how individuals are perceived as just another commodity in the drug dealing world. In the financial calculation of profit and loss, of commodity exchange and accumulation of capital, 'bodies' are just another factor to be considered in terms of its cost. In the capitalist hierarchical structure of the gang, as we've seen earlier in the chess metaphor, the terminology for the participating members reveal a great deal about this approach: subjects could be described as 'solider' or 'muscle', terms that undoubtedly treats the individual as a human vehicle devoid of free will, whilst under the illusionary mask of sovereignty. Here, just like in Reango's argument, black individuals are paralleled to commodities in the reality of the market place. Here, just as well, the black body is a form of appearance of capital.

In this brutal reality the only way out of The Game, as clearly phrased in 50 Cent's album title 'Get Rich or Die Trying', is undeniably through death. But could there be a different route from which to escape this Subject/Object duality and thus defy its law? Moten argues that there is. His notion of the speaking commodity both escapes the problematics of subjectivity, as being always-already subjected to ideology in the Althusserian sense, and the violent erasure of personhood that has been

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<sup>13</sup> Bell Hooks, *We Real Cool* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32.

<sup>14</sup> Hooks, *We Real Cool*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> *The Wire*, HBO, Season 3 episode 6, aired on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2004.

the presumption of the object. "The commodity whose speech sounds" Moten writes, "embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign."<sup>16</sup> By possessing intrinsic substance (Phonic substance for Moten) the commodity disobeys the Marxist principle of the commodity's exchange-value, as being exterior to it, a value that is assigned to it only through its trade. Even more so, the phonic substance of the object, which returns and reverberates through black performance, disrupts the theories of value that have defined it in the first place, and thus redefines the object's humanity: "There occurs in such performances a revaluation or reconstruction of value, one disruptive of the opposition of speech and writing, and spirit and matter".<sup>17</sup>

To Moten, this occurs in black performance, through the irreducibility of the mumble, the falsetto, and the shout in vocal improvisation. Yet, I wish to discuss the work of an artist who could be seen as almost consciously applying Moten's argument through his work. William Pope.L actively positions himself in his various performances as *commodity* in what Darby English called 'aesthetics of dispossession'. In the summer long series of street performances called *How Much is That Nigger in the Window* Pope.L was selling portions of mayonnaise and aspirin pills for astronomic prices.<sup>18</sup> Placing himself within a system of commodity exchange in the social reality of the street, a black man desperately trying to make a living, actually allows him to speak. By reducing himself to commodity, he makes visible and undercuts the laws of race and capitalism, as they come onto play in the construction of class in America.

Less explicit and more complex are Pope.L's crawls, in which his body becomes the medium for new significations as he symbolically embodied the racial Have-Not-Ness. Discussing his choice of "giving up his verticality" Pope.L has said:

*People who are forced to give up their verticality are prey to all kinds of dangers. But let us imagine a person who has a job, possesses the means to remain vertical, but chooses momentarily to give up that verticality? To undergo that threat to his/her body/spiritual categories- that person would learn something. I did... Now I crawl to remember.*<sup>19</sup>

Thinking on this divisions of vertical/horizontal in correlation to Pope.L's definitions of Haves/Have-nots, the crawls come to reveal the illusion of the capitalist promise for class mobility. His use of commodities in the performances (mayonnaise, detergents, superman costume) criticizes the "material condition of meaning production" while manipulating the signs of social class affiliation

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<sup>16</sup> Moten, *In the break*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Moten, *In the break*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Darby English "The Aesthetics of Disposition: William Pope.L's performance interventions." In *How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Columbia: MIT Press, 2007). 255-313

<sup>19</sup> English, *How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 266.

and subverting their fixed meaning. In *Thompkins Square Crawl*, for example, the manipulation of signification of class and race is augmented by the suit Pope.L wears throughout the crawl. The suit as a sign for law-abiding, hardworking citizenship is thwarted by the act of the crawl, or in English's words, "the act of evidently unrealized potential necessarily throws light on the deterring forces themselves."<sup>20</sup> The act of crawling blurs the system of social categorisation of class, race and gender through the embodiment of subjugation, and its breaking. Pope.L's commitment to dispossession through diminishing the privileged position of verticality, claiming ownership for the reduction of his subject position through identification with the silenced inhabitants of the city, and thus becoming the human-object of capital, is a staging through which, just like the commodity who speaks, he "embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> English, *How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 274.

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