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Dancing with Social Death: The Necropolitics of Performing Afro-Slovene(ness)

Keywords

Afro-Slovene, ethnography, necropolitics, Black studies, authenticity, afropessimism

Abstract

Slovenes of African descent find themselves in a calculus of biopower. This points to the precariousness of life (or flesh), which is deemed as less “worthy.” We are at a historical moment in which Afro-pessimism offers a “realistic” glimpse into the past and future of Blackness in the White supremacist contexts of the West, due almost solely to the enormity of systemic violence that Black flesh has endured. In light of this very real political urgency, there is a very real need for security, which in the short term might best be accomplished through concepts such as identity and authenticity. However, Afro-Slovene acts of living reject in passing the priorities that “progress” evokes through the standardization of Euro-normalizing biopolitical orders and slip the categories used to confine them to a limited form of existence. This analysis focuses on the Afro-Slovene insistence on living otherwise as a form of resistance to the tyranny of linear progressive subjectivities, without shedding responsibility for the need to confront race and racism head on.

Ples z družbeno smrtjo: nekropolitika uprizorjanja afro-slovenstva

Ključne besede

afro-slovenstvo, etnografija, nekropolitika, Črnske študije, avtentičnost, afropesimizem

Povzetek

Slovinci afriškega porekla se znajdejo v kalkulaciji biomoči. To kaže na negotovost življenja (ali mesa), ki velja za manj »vredno«. Smo v zgodovinskem trenutku, v katerem afropesimizem ponuja »realističen« v pogled v preteklost in prihodnost Črnske v

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okvirih belih supremacističnih kontekstov Zahoda, in sicer skoraj izključno zaradi obsežnosti sistemskega nasilja, ki ga je pretrpelo »Črnsko meso«. V luči te konkretne politične nujnosti obstaja zelo resnična potreba po varnosti, ki jo je kratkoročno mogoče najbolje doseči s koncepti, kot sta identiteta in avtentičnost. Vendar pa afro-slovenski načini življenja zavračajo prioritete, ki jih prek standardizacije evronormalizacijskih biopolitičnih praks spodbuja »napredek«, s tem pa se izmuznejo kategorijam, ki jih silijo v omejeno obliko obstoja. Ta analiza se osredotoča na afro-slovensko vztrajanje pri drugačnem načinu življenja kot obliki upora proti tiraniji linearnih progresivnih subjektivitet, ne da bi pri tem zavračalo odgovornost za potrebo po neposrednem soočenju s problematiko rase in rasizma.



Wypipo generally love animals more than they love people. Wypipo can see an unarmed bullet-riddled black body leaking blood in the street and feel no empathy, but will be outraged upon hearing that someone mistreated a house cat.¹

Michael Harriot's popular article "Wypipo Explained" is a provocation. He asks: how has it become so easy for us to believe "wypipo" value Black life less than that of their domestic pets? After travelling outside of North America, I wondered if there was something particular about the characteristics or mentality of the White settlers of North America that predisposed them to this form of anti-humanism. As Mos Def and Talib Kweli so insightfully point out on their now iconic album *Black Star*, in a track entitled "Thieves in the Night":

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The deadly ritual seems immersed, in the perverse
Full of short attention spans, short tempers, and short skirts
Long barrel automatics released in short bursts
The length of Black life is treated with short worth²

¹ Michael Harriot, "Wypipo Explained," Afropunk, March 1, 2017, <https://afropunk.com/2017/03/wypipo-explained/>.

² Mos Def and Talib Kweli, vocalists, "Thieves in the Night," produced by 88-Keys, released September 29, 1998, track 12 on *Mos Def & Talib Kweli Are Black Star*, Rawkus RWK 1158-2, compact disc.

Much like Milgram and Zimbardo, I was curious about the existence of some sort essential characteristic hidden in the culture of North America, and particularly embedded in the biology of White settler colonists, that has compelled them so often to treat Black life with “short worth.”

In the run-up to my trip to former socialist Slovenia, I began to ponder the idea, popular at the time, that this sort of objectification of the Black body was the product of a particularly nefarious form of predatory Western neoliberal capitalism. In all honesty, I expected to find evidence that socialism could shield Black people from the most dehumanizing aspects of the colonial process. In fact, I found that there was no racism in Slovenia at all. A young Slovenian student was even kind enough to explain to me on the subject of racism in Slovenia, very slowly so that I would understand, “Well, you see Professor Rudder, we don’t have any racism in Slovenia because we don’t have any Black people.” At that moment I realized that something was not quite right. The absence of racism does not explain, in Slovenia or in any other settler colony, the increasingly obvious fact that despite the lack of racism, those subjectivities not White (enough) possess a form of life that is quantitatively (shall we count the bodies?) “worth less.”³

In this rendering of one aspect of my experience living in Slovenia as a person of African descent, I will be attempting to lend sense to the claim that Slovenia is not racist enough, even if just briefly so that I can make a very particular point.

With this sentiment of absent racism articulated thus, that “there are no Black people,” the question follows, where are “these Black people,” anyways? In this brief introduction to the Afro-Slovene community, I will focus on their cultural performance to largely Euro-Slovene audiences. These moments of encounter are key to my analysis as they provide one avenue through which can be seen a play of identities, as they emerge out of the fiction of community formation. I will be drawing on the Western tradition of art and culture collection and linking it to the generation of identity within a unique biopolitical order, articulated

³ Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 23.

by authors such as Rey Chow,⁴ Achille Mbembe,⁵ and Alexander G. Weheliye.⁶ Western culture and artifact collection has played an important role in the construction of historically and politically specific forms of African and African diasporic representation. The economy of worth within the post-colonial biopolitical order, and the way it has been visited upon Black bodies in the West, I will argue, hails bodies in ways that are unique but not particular to Slovenia. Given the highly contentious nature of “Black identity” in Slovenia, the task of writing Afro-Sloveneness from the future is defined predominantly by its failures.

Indeed, it is in these failures where we find lingering insights that can help to freeze Blackness while at the same time putting Afro-Slovenes in motion in the excess of racialized enclosure. Black “identity” in the Slovene milieu acts very directly as a sort of anchor, fixing Afro-Slovenes to notions of Blackness that emerge out of regimes of representation rather than the embodied practices of living. The concept of Afro-Slovene itself speaks to an “origin story” continually fading beyond the horizon, rather than marking off or enclosing a fixed identity. In lived reality, Afro-Slovene as an observable object often only makes sense in futures where it is called to the service of those who must police the borders of identity. In Slovenia, Black, Afro-Slovene, *tujci*, *črnuh* and *Zamorec* are catch-alls for those from across the sea or God knows where, “*niso naši*” or “they are not us.” One of those most happy phrases in the awkward interactions that take form as mini-interrogations between the “Slovene” and the “Afro-Slovene” proceed as follows: “Where are you from?” But more important, “When are you going home?”

Colonial Ghosts in the Shell

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Afro-Slovenes are continually seduced into a performance of Blackness, both on stage and off, often very conscious of the political nature of their acts. Let us consider for a moment the sorts of agency available to the Black body conceived of in this way—as an artifact of colonial rule. In a compelling argument

⁴ Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁵ Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁶ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

against Kantian notions of the sublime, Maruška Svašek suggests that aesthetics and the construction of European superiority are intimately intertwined, where “ethnocentric aesthetic standards (reflecting the Kantian notion of inherent aesthetic value) divided the human races into a hierarchy of increasingly civilised species, and all humans (once progressed), were thought to eventually share the same aesthetic standards.”⁷ Within Svašek’s work, the notion of “inherent aesthetic value” or “inherent worth” is challenged by the addition of a social component to the ways in which objects are rendered intelligible.

Building on the insights of Arjun Appadurai’s conceptualization of the “social life of things”⁸ and Alfred Gell’s theorization of “secondary” agency,⁹ she mobilizes objects with biographies of their own. Deploying the social life of things allows us to attend to a Black body that does not move through space and place with “inherent aesthetic qualities or enchanting powers”¹⁰ but picks up meaning through a process of symbolic inscription from discrete contexts. In conceptualizing the object in this way, its perceived qualities are to a certain extent fluid and open to change, but also scripted by the affective and symbolic luggage they acquire. Appadurai’s historical approach suggests that for things,

their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. No social analysis of things (whether the analyst is an economist, an art historian, or an anthropologist) can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism. This methodological fetishism, returning our attention to the things themselves, is in part a corrective to the tendency to excessively sociologize transactions in things.¹¹

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⁷ Maruška Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production: Histories, Themes, Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 23.

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁹ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Svašek, *Anthropology*, 121.

¹¹ Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 5.

To inscribe objects with a biography, and from there, as Svašek suggests, attribute them a form of secondary agency, provides one avenue through which to begin thinking about the Black body as object/container/*enclosure*.¹² As an extension of Appadurai's notion of the biography of things, Svašek's interrogation of this slippery area between "mere thing" and "agent" allows, at least in my mind, to read and hold epistemology and ontological arguments regarding the Black body side by side.¹³ As a product of ideology, the Black body attracts a habit of being seen.¹⁴ As an object of the *gaze*, it has been mobilized with hierarchies of biopower that produce the excess where Black bodies have always lived *otherwise*. In other words, it will enable the Black body to be both enclosed in the discursive (or *thématique*) and emergent in its ontology.

Why might this reading side by side be important to this project? For a couple of reasons: 1) to further depersonalize the management of bodies within our contemporary, where every argument is taken as moral¹⁵ and personalized as such, and 2), the more important reason, to find a conceptual structure that actually honors the words of Afro-Slovenes I spoke with. In the following passage, from Afro-Slovene #1, I would draw attention to the ways in which he navigates the fraught identity of being both African and Slovene:

Ok people can see my identity, but if you ask me who I am . . . I didn't explain very well this one, but this changing of identity depends on me. When I am really representing Africa or Slovenia or Afro-Slovene, at the end of the day I am just a *človek*, a human, and that is what you get, your identity, what you get from living this life . . . this is my contention.

¹² Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), 16. In his own words: "The abstract concept of materiality, I argue, has actually hindered the proper understanding of materials. We would learn more by engaging directly with the materials themselves, following what happens to them as they circulate, mix with one another, solidify and dissolve in the formation of more or less enduring things. We discover, then, that materials are active. Only by putting them inside closed-up objects are they reduced to dead or inert matter. It is this attempted enclosure that has given rise to the so-called 'problem of agency.' It is a problem of our own making." Ingold, 16.

¹³ For more on this notion of "reading side by side" consult Petra Mikulan and Nathalie Sinclair, *Time and Education: Time Pedagogy Against Oppression* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

¹⁴ Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022).

Insights from Tim Ingold's notion of *living* help to resist the gravitation pull of authenticity and agency in the passage above, which have always served more to rank on progressive scales (as Svašek notices above) than to honor the epistemological value¹⁶ of "native" voice. Counter to readings of Afro-Slovene #1 that would seek to find reason in their decision making and argumentation, I am taking fore-granted their expertise on *living* African in the Slovenian context. My task here is to develop a way of thinking with forms of Black vitality which, "never will they yield" to biopolitical categories insisting that "mud is bread for negroes"¹⁷ and have often sought first and foremost to render "Blackness" knowable to power. Black vitality is *also* lazy, irrational, angry, broken and above all unproductive. Sarah Jama's chapter "The Need to Root Disability Justice into Movements" in *Until We Are Free* invigorates the "broken" and "useless" with purpose value outside of progressive timelines and the tyranny of perfectability. As she argues:

We will not see liberation from the systems that oppress us in this country unless we shift our movement-building to also focus on the protection and liberation of disabled people. [. . .] Disabled people are thus the antithesis to the capitalist system that continues to base the value of human being on our ability to compete and produce, because many people with disabilities cannot work and do not choose to work.¹⁸

What Afropessimism 2.0 sometimes forgets, in its long and impassioned laments on the "social death of the black man,"¹⁹ is also that some forms of Black vitality need not always be resuscitated.²⁰ In social death, there are also opportunities to acknowledge that ways in which "social life" in the postcolonial has never re-

¹⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that structures must be developed to incorporate the epistemological value of native voice if there is to be any redemption for ethnography. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 136.

¹⁷ Claude McKay, "Tiger," in *The Black Poets*, ed. Dudley Randall, repr. ed. (Toronto: Bantam, 1985), 62.

¹⁸ Sarah Jama, "The Need to Root Disability Justice into Movements," in *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*, ed. Rodney Diverlus, Sandy Hudson, and Syrus Marcus Ware (Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2020), 186.

¹⁹ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

²⁰ Gloria Wekker, "Afropessimism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 28, no. 1 (February 2021): 86–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506820971224>.

ally spoken to Black experience in the first place. In this sense, Ingold's notion of *lifeworld*, with its intrinsic acknowledgement of change, is important here.

In what follows, I will attempt to suspend the conceptual lines between Western Europe and the Balkans and create an affiliation facilitated through an interrogation of the biopolitical order which they both share in common.

Returning to the question of racism in post-socialist Slovenia, needed is a framework that helps evoke a form of Black vitality that lives not only alongside capitalism but also "side by side" with a shared European biopolitical order. To accomplish this task, if only in moments, I will be taking seriously Ingold's notion of *lifeworlds*²¹ and the forms of *living* it suggests might be possible. *Lifeworlds* will turn a spotlight toward *living* as the passive yet dynamic force of being alive. Ultimately, what we are looking for, as Ingold identified in his emphasis on being alive, is a notion of life that is released from the subject, or a creator with an elevated status in relation to the eye, not as machinic hindrance, but as cinematic machine. As opposed to a more active vitalism in which life is mobilized in the form of enclosure, and subjects act while objects are acted upon, we need a notion of living that can free individuals from containment. To begin thinking this, Claire Colebrook suggests that

there is an active vitalism, then, that wishes to trace all events back to their originating genesis. Such a vitalism must rely on a moral and temporal distinction between active and passive: in the beginning is the creative act that institutes differences and that is subsequently belied when those differences are taken to be the logic from which creativity flows.²²

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In refiguring what is meant by being alive, outside of the language or origins and destinations, there is potential perhaps for a mode of perception to be denaturalized and placed in context. This habit of reading too much from surface, what Ingold has termed *inversion*, assumes that the object is contained (or in a sense separate from its environment) and that something about its intrinsic na-

²¹ The kinds of living enabled by Ingold's notion of inhabiting lifeworlds, as opposed to dwelling in environments, is instrumental in terms of its ability to disperse humanist subjectivity within fields of relations. See Ingold, *Being Alive*.

²² Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life* (London: Continuum, 2010), 27.

ture can be known with reference to what can be seen; or in other words that an object can be classified without taking into consideration the relations in which it is moving.²³ *Life*, in this rendering, becomes that which “will not be contained, that overflows any boundaries that might be thrown around it.”²⁴ Inversion therefore is used to critique the modernist obsession with enclosed and stable objects and used to “refer to the operation that wraps lines of flight into bounded points.”²⁵ By employing it, he hopes to counter the “conventional image of a network of interacting entities” with what he calls the “meshwork of entangled lines of life, growth and movement. This is the world we inhabit.”²⁶

Fraught Performance

Though Slovenia does not share a history of participation in the colonial mission in Africa (with exceptions such as Ignacij Knoblehar)²⁷ many of the stereotypes of Black and African people present during the times of Yugoslavia remain and show surprising consistency with those found in other Western countries. In the interviews I conducted with people of African descent living in Slovenia, there was consistent agreement that certain misconceptions about people of African descent have always been present, even if some would not immediately call Slovenian “ignorance” racist. And certainly, there is good reason to be cautious of the term “racism” given how reliant it tends to be on context for specific definition.²⁸ It can also be argued that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discuss a “separate terrain” which has somehow escaped the “increasing rapidity and the voracious appetite with which the post-modern culture imperializes and devours spaces.”²⁹ The notion of a diminishing “separate terrain” is important when

²³ Ingold, *Being Alive*, 57.

²⁴ Ingold, 83.

²⁵ Ingold, 63.

²⁶ Ingold, 63.

²⁷ Knoblehar was born in Škocjan in Lower Carniola. He completed his early studies in Slovenia before attending the College of Propaganda in Rome. In 1845, he was ordained a priest and completed his doctorate in theology a year later. He is known for his missionary work in Africa.

²⁸ See David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996); Claire Alexander, “Stuart Hall and ‘Race,’” *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (July 2009): 457–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380902950914>.

²⁹ Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak

thinking about African presence and performance in Slovenia, as it allows us to situate not only Black performance in a global historical context but particularly Black bodies as well. In terms of the Afro-Slovene community, it is predominantly skin color that provides the avenue through which a notion of “community” is constructed. Unfortunate and at times confusing, the phrase “African cultural performance” itself is misleading in that it implies the existence of an “African” community organized around a stable and coherent continental identity.

Afro-Slovene bodies are often still described according to a way of thinking about the colonized Other that is laden with administrative language and management practices overloaded with a desire for power and control.³⁰ As accentuated by Ranajit Guha in his study of colonial administrative practices, a certain “grammar” was developed that was more ideological than descriptive with regard to writing about the native. In insidious ways, these managerial priorities have influenced the wider Western project of writing about the Other.³¹ Conceptions of agency and objectivity are in a tangible sense at the heart of the ways in which the Black body continues to be “subject to” the State, as a structure that relies heavily on the language and logics of race.³²

As the Afro-Slovenes in this research have suggested, lack of information is exacerbated by the fact that what is presented on topics of Africa and African people is of very low quality. During the time I was in Slovenia, from 2004 to 2011, tragically uninformed school textbooks and even children’s stories take on a more sinister aspect as they are presented in a climate that can be characterized by misinformation about Africa.³³ An example that will help give meaning to the following quotation from an interview with Afro-Slovene #2 highlights the ways in which even a children’s story book can contribute the spread of stereotypes that present Africa as an undeveloped *Elsewhere*. Juri Muri v Afriki [Juri Muri in

Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2000), 163.

³⁰ Trouillot, *Global Transformations*; Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

³¹ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*.

³² David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001); Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000).

³³ Janez Pirc, “Misrepresentations of Africa in Contemporary Slovene School Textbooks,” *Treatises And Documents: Journal of Ethnic Studies* 63 (December 2010): 124–49.

Africa] is the story of a Slovene boy's adventure to Africa and is easily accessible. At the time of this writing, the story was even available on YouTube.³⁴

In this presentation of *Juri Muri in Africa*, I will be primarily concerned with just one way it has been read by certain members of the Afro-Slovene community. In the story, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's Western *thématique* is subtly put in motion with the words of Juri Muri himself: "Uf, daleč je ta Afrika [Uf, Africa is so far]."³⁵ To recall Trouillot's words, the "West's vision of order implied from its inception two complementary spaces, the Here and the Elsewhere, which premised one another and were conceived as inseparable."³⁶ Indeed, it is interesting to mark the ways in which Slovenian discourse on Africa overlaps with what has normally been considered a Western *thématique*, one characterized by Trouillot as being saturated by the priorities of colonial rule. In Afro-Slovene #2's Afro-Slovene circles, Juri Muri has become shorthand for a particular way of imagining Africa and the Black body.

In a discussion of what motivates Slovenes to attend African performance, Afro-Slovene #2 remarks:

The Juri Muri people are more into dancing and naked bodies but anyone who values culture would come there and enjoy themselves and learn something new. To a large extent by performing African arts, you can end up contributing to the stereotypes that Slovenes already have, something I have been living with for more than 30 years. So, I had the choice to perform or not, I thought to myself fine, there is always a risk that if you perform people will understand one way which you don't want them to, but I chose to perform to educate and raise awareness. We use culture as a tool. When I do workshops with kids, we will do some theatre stuff, and some dancing and drumming but then there is also stories, and educational stuff in there, there are videos so they see that we have cities.

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In other words, we might say that there are those among the Slovene public still searching for Juri Muri. In this quest, we are reminded of the anthropologist:

³⁴ Tone Pavček, writer, "Juri Muri v Afriki," YouTube video, uploaded by Tina Mauhar, March 24, 2020, 19:10, <https://youtu.be/GH6fTqw9brI>.

³⁵ Tone Pavček, *Juri Muri v Afriki* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1958).

³⁶ Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 21.

“The portrait of the postmodernist anthropologist that emerges from this dual exercise is not a happy one indeed. Camera and notebooks in hand, he is looking for the Savage, but the Savage has vanished.”³⁷ In terms of the ways in which an imperative was developed to study “primitive people,” it became crucial to document the sorts of “authentic” native cultures that would just as much vanish as transform in contact with the modern West. The step was in some sense premised, particularly in more vulgar forms, on the notion that primitive peoples were incapable of the sorts of change that would allow them to maintain their own culture and become part of the modern world at the same time, a great lament, for example, in the work of Lévi-Strauss.³⁸

Multicultural Slovenia

It is in this movement where Afro-Slovenes insistence on living otherwise that *living itself*, outside of an economy which has tended to capitalize on their death, becomes resistance and should assume our focused attention; without shedding responsibility for how this can certainly be read in the liberal context as a movement away from the use of *race* to discuss the political impacts and epistemological weight of the term. It is not that race doesn’t matter; it is that we often do not have the tools to understand the significance of race in the generation of so-called progressed subjectivities. This conversation cannot be fruitfully undertaken without consideration of how we have come to think about life or vitality, and the governance thereof.

Building on this notion of Whiteness as generative rather than constructed,³⁹ I suggest that one potential avenue through which to interrogate the similarities of racialization in these two seemingly very different contexts is biopolitics. If we can assume that woman, Black, queer, disabled have always played a key role in the generation of Western Whiteness and Modern Euro-normativity,⁴⁰ then an interesting question arises: To what extent is Africa and the African generative of Slovene Whiteness and Westernness in the Slovene context?

³⁷ Trouillot, 24.

³⁸ Robert Deliege, *Levi-Strauss Today: An Introduction to Structural Anthropology*, trans. Nora Scott (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 45–46.

³⁹ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*.

⁴⁰ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 62; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*; Trouillot, *Global Transformations*.

There are good reasons for continuing this discussion of anti-Black racism and the governance of life and death into the Slovenian context to discuss Afro-Slovene experience. Though we remain engaged with the ways in which Black vitality is not only subject to, but also a product of, a very particular form of surveillance and violence, it remains equally true that we, in the everyday act of “living” do so also otherwise. The somewhat naïve, but I would venture mostly hopeful, aim of this particular deployment is to allow for imaginings of Black vitality that facilitate motion, contingency, and skilled practice, as an avenue through which to address the practice of living as an alternative to the overly romantic sentimentalities of “agency.” My thoughts on Afro-Slovene experience are rendered here as a challenge to regimes of representation that seek to generate forms of “understandability” through concepts such as authenticity, identity, and belonging.

Indeed, the stakes here are high, as agency and identity within multicultural frameworks leave little room to consider the process of interaction as a potentially open-ended event of encounter. As Rey Chow points out, multicultural politics abhor discussion of the “struggle and violence inherent” that is obfuscated in overly optimistic renderings of cross-cultural interaction. In Chow’s reading of Frederic Jameson’s critique of multicultural politics, “one finds here not the liberalist, progressivist view that different cultures together form one big multicultural family but a reminder of the uncompromised understanding about human aggressiveness.”⁴¹

Through this interrogation of the Black body as it has been constructed within the Western *thématique*, I hope to create trajectories through which to investigate the limitations of recognition theory and the subsequent obsession with agency that arises out of this set of priorities. We start with Fanon’s engagement with the colonial encounter in which the Black body is, in a sense, what was called forth into the great European endeavor with the memorable hail: “Hey look at the nigger! . . . Mama, a Negro!”⁴² In conversation with Afro-Slovene #3, this passage from Fanon, which may seem a bit outdated now, still has very real

⁴¹ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 55.

⁴² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Pluto Press, 2008), 85.

and living memory in Slovenia. In recalling a “seemingly innocent” incident between his son and a White Slovene, he recalled:

I can remember when my son was around four or five years, and two kids were running behind us. And one of those kids said, “Hey, look, two black guys!” you know, “Look, a black kid!” And my son stopped, and he went to them and he said my name is . . .

Say his name! What is whispered also in the context is, “Hey, look, look at this white kid!” Through examination of such events can be found one potential avenue to mobilize Ingold’s notion of enclosure to highlight the violence, perpetrated on both the viewed and the viewer, by the reduction of the complex experience of living to a color. In the following memorable passage Fanon, the Black body is lost (to itself and found within a symbolic enclosure that functions also as a kind of prison:

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it’s cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother’s arms: Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.⁴³

300 Though this moment has often been thought through with Hegelian recognition theory, other trajectories remain possible. To consider the ways in which identities are hailed by the State, recognition theory allows for the possibility to think through how skin and race can become binding in certain contexts at the level of language and the human symbolic. However, the colonial encounter is not simply a moment between the White child as subject (subject of the state) and the Black man as object of Western gaze (subject to the state). If we are to leave aspects of Foucault in which discourse and practice create an inescapable

⁴³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 86.

field of symbolic interpretive thought⁴⁴ perhaps it will be possible to map different trajectories in starting points alluded to by Paul Gilroy in *Against Race*.⁴⁵ To search for another line of thinking here would not simply be a pedantic meander through the limitations of discourse, but an attempt to find other avenues through which to investigate the “weighted and reeling present.”⁴⁶

Flushing out the ephemeral past requires a calculus of biopower that speaks in peculiar ways to the precarity of life (or flesh) deemed less “worthy.” Aside from the epistemological conundrums of “Black” identity and the question of the muted experience of “racism,” the everyday occurrence of living with Black skin in Slovenia raises questions that do not diminish the necessary importance of security and the urgencies of survival. Afro-Slovenes, in their acts of living reject in passing the priorities that “progress” evokes through the standardization of Euro-normalizing biopolitical orders and slip the categories used to confine them to a limited form of existence—yet the burden they bear is onerous.

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⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 777–95, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>; Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia,” in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2000), 72–115.

⁴⁵ Gilroy, *Against Race*.

⁴⁶ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

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