

RYNE BEDDARD  
University of Denver

## #SUBJECTIVITIES: #BLACKLIVESMATTER, AFFROPESSIMISM, AND ALAIN BADIOU

#BlackLivesMatter can be understood as more than a hashtag, more than an idea, more than an identity, and it is even more than a movement – it can be understood, I argue, as a militant proclamation of truth. In saying this, I am inflecting the understanding of truth given voice by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. Badiou does not have what could be called a correspondence theory of truth<sup>1</sup>, but rather a militant one: truths are rare, they are intimately connected to events, and they require a faithful subjective body to maintain them. Truth, in this mode of speaking, does not then correspond to reality but rather it makes a demand upon it, and in doing so, changes it. This, I argue, is a helpful framework for conceptualizing the truth of #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>2</sup>

Demonstrating this necessitates outlining some basic principles of Badiou's thought as developed in his 2009 work *Logics of Worlds*<sup>3</sup>. There is no World, with a capital 'w', but multiple worlds, or situations, each governed by its own local logic. Within these worlds, evental sites appear. These sites make possible events, or radical novelties, which are the key element of Badiou's project. When these events occur in the political register (as opposed to the artistic, scientific, and amorous registers – which, alongside politics, constitute what Badiou, following Plato, considers the four conditions of philosophy), they produce political subjects. There are essentially three types of subjects, or subjective dispositions, produced by an event: the faithful subject, the reactive subject, and the obscure subject.<sup>4</sup> These subjective types are all formalizable mathematically, for Badiou, and they all function in particular ways in relation to an event. In this paper, I will map these types onto the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the two reactionary movements that spawned from it –

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence theory posits that true statements correspond to the way things actually are.

<sup>2</sup> I am not, however, arguing that this is the only, or even the best, conceptual framework for #BlackLivesMatter. It is merely my intention to add to an ongoing conversation in what I hope is a productive way.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, Trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 45-78. Badiou also mentions resurrection, which occurs when a faithful subject has been successfully obscured in its own world and is nonetheless regenerated in a new world under a new trace. See: Ibid, 65.

#BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter – in order to better conceptualize the relationship between these three movements and what is at stake in their respective discourses.

### *The Faithful Subject*

In order to demonstrate the mathematical formulas that Badiou uses, a couple of symbols must be defined. The theory of the subject presupposes that in a world where a subject appears, there is an event which has left a trace and this trace is written as  $\varepsilon$ . There is also a new body, issued from the event, which is written as  $C$ .<sup>5</sup> There is the symbol for the operation of consequence which is written ' $\Rightarrow$ ' (if one were to express that  $y$  is the consequence of  $x$  they would write ' $x \Rightarrow y$ '), and the symbol for the operation of subordination which is written '-' (if one were to express that  $y$  is subordinated to  $x$  they would write ' $\frac{x}{y}$ '). There is the symbol for erasure, which is written '/', which refers to the way in which the body is divided by points, which are "what confronts the global situation with singular choices, with decisions that involve the 'yes' and the 'no.'"<sup>6</sup> This is expressed by placing the body under the erasure, which is written as ' $\mathcal{C}$ '. Lastly, there is the new present, or "the set of consequences of the eventual trace, as realized by the successive treatment of points,"<sup>7</sup> which is written as  $\pi$ . Given all these symbols it is now possible to describe the formula for the faithful subject. In Badiou's own words:

It is a formula in which a divided (and new) body becomes, under the bar, something like the active unconscious of a trace of the event - an activity which, by exploring the consequences of what has happened, engenders the expansion of the present and exposes, fragment by fragment, a truth. Such a subject realizes itself in the production of consequences, which is why it can be called faithful – faithful to  $\varepsilon$  and thus to that vanished event of which  $\varepsilon$  is the trace. The product of this fidelity is the new present which welcomes, point by point, the new truth. We could also say that it is the subject in the present.<sup>8</sup>

Or, this formula can be expressed as a matheme in the following way:<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As an example of the new body issued by the event Badiou mentions the slaves, following Spartacus in 73 BCE, who, upon revolting, do not disperse into various factions, but instead remain together, thus constituting a new body. See: Ibid, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>9</sup> The faithful subject cannot, in itself, be identified with any of the individual symbols of this formula, but rather, it is, as Badiou notes, the formula as a whole. What this subject 'activates,' in Badiou's terminology, is a truth procedure.

$$\frac{\varepsilon}{\zeta} \Rightarrow \pi$$

This formal matheme can be seen embodied in the hashtag turned rallying cry turned political movement: #BlackLivesMatter. The movement, which was founded by three black women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi – recognizes itself as a response to a particular event. According to their website, "#BlackLivesMatter was created in 2012 after Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted for his crime, and dead 17-year old Trayvon was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the murder of Trayvon Martin, the extra-judicial murders of Eric Garner<sup>11</sup> and Michael Brown<sup>12</sup> in the summer of 2014 in the streets of New York City and Ferguson, Missouri respectively led to an increased awareness and a renewed sense of urgency among the general public concerning the plight of black lives in the United States. Countless other names could be added to this list which – given the heightened awareness of these killings – constitute the radical break with the past and the ushering in of the new present inaugurated by the new subjective body: #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>13</sup> To be clear, this does not imply an erasure of previous modes of black resistance in the United States – but rather, it is the new subject that resurfaces the now obscured truth of slave revolts and the Black Panther party in a new world,

<sup>10</sup> "About the Black Lives Matter Network," *Black Lives Matter*, accessed October 15, 2016, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Garner was a forty-three-year-old black father of six who was strangled to death in broad daylight on a street corner in Staten Island, New York on July 17, 2014 by police officers who suspected he was selling "loose" cigarettes. The officer, Daniel Pantaleo, who ignored Garner's multiple complaints that he could not breathe while strangling him to death, was not indicted.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Brown was an eighteen-year-old black man who was shot numerous times in Ferguson, Missouri and then his body was left in the street for four hours. Darren Wilson, the police officer who killed him, was not indicted.

<sup>13</sup> Laquan McDonald was a seventeen-year-old black boy who was killed by police in Chicago, Illinois on October 20, 2014. Video footage of incident later revealed that the Chicago PD lied in their initial police report on the incident and allegedly destroyed video evidence from a nearby surveillance camera. Tamir Rice was a twelve-year-old black boy who was shot on November 22, 2014 in Cleveland, Ohio where he was in a park playing with a toy gun. Timothy Loehmann, the police officer who shot Rice within two seconds upon arriving on the scene, was not indicted. Walter Scott was a black man who shot in the back while running from the police on April 4, 2015 in North Charleston, South Carolina. The police report, which stated that Scott attacked the police officer and took his Taser, was later exposed as a lie by video footage. These are just a small handful of the incidents in which black people were killed by police between 2012 and 2016 which led to national scrutiny of the abuse of black people by the police and the legal system.

to use Badiou's terminology.<sup>14</sup> As Frantz Fanon writes, "Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity."<sup>15</sup>

These names make up what Badiou calls the "material body of a truth," or the "glorious body."<sup>16</sup> Badiou writes,

It is in this context that it is necessary to think and endorse the vital importance of proper names in all revolutionary politics. Their importance is indeed both spectacular and paradoxical. On the one hand, in effect, emancipatory politics is essentially the politics of the anonymous masses; it is the victory of those with no names, of those who are held in a state of colossal insignificance by the State. On the other hand, it is distinguished all along the way by proper names, which define it historically, which represent it, much more forcibly than is the case for other kinds of politics... The reason is that all these proper names symbolize historically – in the guise of an individual, of a pure singularity of body and thought – the rare and precious network of ephemeral sequences of politics as truth.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, it is only possible to begin to understand and account for this new subjective disposition in lieu of these names and the implicit state sanctioned terror that they represent. The collective weight of these murders, along with the naming and indictment of state sanctioned violence against black bodies that took root in the contemporary political imagination, coalesced into a genuinely novel situation, or world, in which politics in the United States has once again become explicitly racialized. This is not to say that racialized politics did not play a determining role in both the theory and practice of policing, housing, education, etc... prior to this event; but rather, that this racial inequality, which can still be rejected or obscured, can no longer be ignored.

In other words, an event – which is to say, a radical rupturing of the world by a singularity which cannot be reduced to the logic of that world and therefore inauguates a new one its midst – took place. #BlackLivesMatter is, in Badiou's language, the trace of this event. And one can recognize it as an event by the consequences which are drawn from it – none of which are more important for Badiou than the production of a subject.

---

<sup>14</sup> For more on Badiou's notion of resurrection see Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 65.

<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 145.

<sup>16</sup> Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, 183.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 187.

It is worth noting, as Hollis Phelps does, that “Badiou’s subject does not immediately correspond to the human individual.”<sup>18</sup> Rather, Badiou speaks of subjective bodies which are capable of producing truths. A subject, writes Badiou,

[I]s the active (or corporeal, or organic) bearer of the dialectical overcoming of simple materialism. The materialist dialectic says: ‘There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths.’ The ‘except that’ exists qua subject. In other words, if a body avers itself capable of producing effects that exceed the bodies-languages system (and such effects are called truths), this body will be said to be subjectivized.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, #BlackLivesMatter can be understood as a subjective body, producing a genuinely new truth that is incompatible with the old world (insofar as black lives and bodies have not historically mattered in the United States). This truth, however, is, in a certain sense, quite fragile. It requires the militant fidelity of this new subjective body in order to avoid being abolished or obscured. This is why Badiou refers to the subject that is both inaugurated by and continues to give life to this new present as the faithful subject.

While a faithful subject, for Badiou, can appear in any of the four conditions of philosophy – art, love, science, and politics – it is the latter with which this paper is concerned. Insofar as the condition in question is politics, the new, local present will be recognizable, by an enthusiasm for a new egalitarian maxim.<sup>20</sup> This new egalitarian maxim, despite being particular in its generation, is universal in its consequences and import – the event becomes a reality for everyone. “[E]very philosophy,” says Badiou, “is conditioned by a real politics.”<sup>21</sup> Real politics does not include most of what passes under the name of politics today, it is not administration, distribution, or consensus building. All this amounts to what he calls “capital-parliamentarianism.” Real politics is the militant affirmation of an egalitarian politics. So Badiou says, “Political equality is not what we desire or plan; it is that which we declare to be, here and now, in the heat of the moment, and not something that should be.”<sup>22</sup> This is precisely the militant affirmation that #BlackLivesMatter proclaims.

<sup>18</sup> Hollis Phelps, *Alain Badiou: Between Theology & Anti-Theology* (Durham, NC: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2013), 74.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 76. Phelps explains that, for Badiou, a truth only exists as a future anterior. He goes on to say, “Since a generic procedure takes place under the mode of the future anterior, then conversely and strictly speaking, knowledge of a truth is always retroactive, meaning that it can be partially grasped only through the positing of provisional results.” See: Phelps, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 98.

### *The Reactive Subject*

There are, however, alternative responses to the event that do not constitute a faithful subject. The reactive subject is not, as it may appear on the surface, the conservation of the old world over and against the new one. The event is an event for everyone. It creates a new world and along with it the possibility of what Badiou calls “reactionary novelties.” There is no going back after the event, but there can be new modes of resistance that react against the event rather than remaining faithful to it. This is the disposition of the new reactive subject.

This is best exemplified by the emergence of another subjective body: #BlueLivesMatter. This movement was founded as a reaction to #BlackLivesMatter in 2014 that meant to recast the focus of the conversation, not on the victims of police brutality, but on the police themselves as victims. As a purely reactive subjective disposition it does not, according to Badiou, produce a new truth – it merely reacts to one. This is because, as Jonathan Russell points out, “Blue lives have never lived under erasure, where their lives were considered less than, disposable, and constitutively hostile to order.” He goes on to summarize the reactive nature of this new movement quite succinctly:

Black sociality has always been considered dangerous to the social order—a social order built upon their denigration and disempowerment. A black life is a life under the threat of social death, a social life constituted by precarity and the potential of imminent death... Blue lives have no analogous history, no precarious location from which their collective life needs recovery. If anything, the near divinization of policing and the recent increased militarization of law enforcement has functioned as a continued source of their over-empowerment, exemplified in the countless examples of enforcing the ‘law’ while operating in social spaces as if they transcend it. Blue lives are not lives under erasure, living under conditions similar to black life. It is the history of black lives not mattering that gives meaning to the hashtag. Blue lives have no such analogous history.<sup>23</sup>

This “social death,” which I will return to briefly, is the barrier that will ultimately bar black bodies from being faithfully represented in the obscure subject: #AllLivesMatter. However, what is important here is the recognition that the lives of police officers have not historically been placed under the same

---

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Russell, “Here’s What’s Wrong With #BlueLivesMatter,” *Huffington Post*, July 9, 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-russell2/heres-whats-wrong-with-bl\\_b\\_10906348.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-russell2/heres-whats-wrong-with-bl_b_10906348.html).

conditions as the lives that #BlueLivesMatter tries to make them analogous too. The analogy itself is exposed entirely once one considers the ontological separation between the two, which will be discussed below.

Like the faithful subject, for Badiou, this new subjective disposition can also be formalized. Essential for the reactive subject matheme is a symbol which has not been used yet. This is the symbol for negation, which is written as ' $\neg$ ' (if one were to express the negation of  $x$  they would write  $\neg x$ ). What this new subject negates is the trace of the event, which could be written as  $\neg \varepsilon$ , but it cannot be reduced to this. This new subject also seeks to produce a new present. However, this new present is always defined negatively, for the reactive subject, as "a present 'a little less worse' than the past."<sup>24</sup> In other words, #BlueLivesMatter can only emerge as a reaction against what this new subjective body sees as the catastrophe of a new present in which the claim that black lives do, in truth, matter is militantly affirmed.

This is the extinguished present, which makes use of the double bar of extinction, (written as '='), and it is written as  $\#$ . The reactive subject can be described as the subordination of the faithful subject to negation of the trace, which has as its consequence the extinguished present. Or, the matheme for the reactive subject is written in the following way:

$$\frac{\neg \varepsilon}{\begin{matrix} \varepsilon \\ \cancel{\varepsilon} \end{matrix} \Rightarrow \pi} \Rightarrow \#$$

This can be described by saying that the faithful subject, with its new present, is subordinated to the negation of the trace of the event which has the consequence of the extinguished present. What is important to remember here is that this is never simply the conservation of the old. What the matheme makes clear is that the reactionary subject, #BlueLivesMatter, requires a faithful subject, #BlackLivesMatter, to subordinate to the negation of the trace of the event. As Badiou says, "the faithful subject nonetheless remains the unconscious of the reactive subject."<sup>25</sup> Or said otherwise, it is only in a world in which the normalcy of implicitly state sanctioned police brutality has been named and called into question can #BlueLivesMatter even begin to make sense. It is fundamentally predicated on this disavowal of a new truth.

### *The Obscure Subject*

Lastly, there is the obscure subject, which seeks to conceive an "abolition of the new present, considered in its entirety as malevolent and *de jure* nonexistent."<sup>26</sup> For this subject, it is the

<sup>24</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 59. Italics in original.

present itself that is subordinated, or falls under the bar. What is required here is to obscure altogether the new present, in both its faithful and reactive formulations. This, again, cannot be a mere return to the old, although that is certainly what is desired by this subject. The way in which the new present is obscured must itself be novel, in order to be up to the task.

With the obscure subject there is, once again, a negation of the trace of the event, which the obscure subject may very well borrow from the efforts of the reactive subject. The consequence of this negation, here, is the negation of the divided body, which is the real body. All of this happens as a consequence of a privileging of the non-divided (and non-real) body. This non-divided body is a transcendence which subordinates the new present to itself. The formula for the obscure subject can be described as the subordination of the present to the non-divided body. This non-divided body has as its consequence the negation of the event which leads to the negation of the divided body. Or, this matheme can be expressed in the following way:

$$\frac{C \Rightarrow (\neg e \Rightarrow \neg \emptyset)}{\pi}$$

Like the previous two subjects, the obscure subject cannot be formulated without the new present. It may be subordinated to the (fictional) transcendence of the undivided body, but the reality that this subordination must occur signifies that a new present, and the event which produced it, exists. Whereas the faithful subject is the unconscious for the reactive subject, what remains in the unconscious of the obscure subject is the present itself. The new present cannot, and must not, be accounted for.

We can see this form embodied in the appearance of #AllLivesMatter. In it, the new present inaugurated by #BlackLivesMatter must be obscured in favor of cheap liberal tropes regarding the formal equality of all humans.<sup>27</sup> It is precisely in that it operates under this guise of equality that makes this the most sinister of the unfaithful subjective types. For this reason, it will require more attention here.

I start with a very simple proposition here: #AllLivesMatter is not, in fact, interested in all lives in spite of the appeal to a sort of formal equality of lives. This proposition is simple enough to defend by merely acknowledging that there has been no sustained and substantial effort to use #AllLivesMatter as a rallying call for the defense of bacterial, vegetable, or animal life. Rather, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Formal equality can be understood as something like equality before the law, or at least formally so. This derives from Aristotle's injunction to "treat like cases as like." See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.3.

1131a10-b15. However, as Marx points out, formal equality can, as often does, cover over substantive, or actual, inequality. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 241-246.

movement is concerned with “human” life. I argue that it is precisely in their uncritical implicit utilization of the “human” grammar that exposes the sinister underbelly of the obscurantist #AllLivesMatter movement.

What is the human? The modern conception can be traced back to Immanuel Kant, who understands the human as the rational, sovereign, independent member of the commonwealth who exists as the a priori condition for a just and stable state.<sup>28</sup> However this stability, writes Afropessimist scholar Frank B. Wilderson III, is dependent upon a “state of emergency” for indigenous and black people.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the kind of social relationality that the Kantian human enjoys as a member of the commonwealth is, for Wilderson, following Orlando Patterson, ontologically inaccessible for a black person insofar as blackness has become ontologically indistinguishable from slavery.

In *Slavery and Social Death*,<sup>30</sup> Patterson compellingly demonstrates that forced labor and alienation are not the constitutive elements of slavery, but rather social death is. Slavery, he argues, originates as a substitution for death. “Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war. But almost as frequently, the death commuted was punishment for some capital offense, or death from exposure or starvation,” he writes, and then continues,

The condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death. Slavery was not a pardon; it was, peculiarly, a conditional commutation. The execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness. The master was essentially a ransomer. What he bought or acquired was the slave's life, and restraints on the master's capacity wantonly to destroy his slave did not undermine his claim on that life. Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson...

---

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, “On the Relationship of Theory to Practice in Political Right,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 74.

<sup>29</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

George E. “Tink” Tinker, a member of the Osage Nation and an American Indian scholar, writes, “We must be clear about this one thing: states must necessarily oppress indigenous peoples, must destroy our self-identity, our cultures, and our religious and spiritual traditions. States have no choice but to oppress and suppress precisely because our ancient claim to the land is a constant and persistent challenge to the legitimacy and coherence of the state and its claim by virtue of discover (read conquest) of our territories.” George E. “Tink” Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 25. Italics in original.

<sup>30</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. That they reached back for the past, as they reached out for the related living, there can be no doubt. Unlike other persons, doing so meant struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage.<sup>31</sup>

This recognition that the slave is constituted by a lack of relationality and a social death, rather than by work and forced labor, is important for Wilderson, who writes that,

Once the “solid” plank of “work” is removed from slavery, then the conceptually coherent notion of “claims against the state” – the proposition that the state and civil society are elastic enough to even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position – disintegrates into thin air. The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle passage. Put another way, No slave, no world. And, in addition, as Patterson argues, no slave is in the world.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, the analogy between the worker and the slave that would allow for a traditional Marxist class analyses is shown to be a ruse. Likewise, the liberal human rights discourse that would emphasize inclusion for black people is also bankrupt, insofar as it fails to recognize itself as grammar constructed on the distinction between rational, sovereign humanity on the one hand

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 5. Emphasis added. Patterson goes on to clarify: “When we say that the slave was natively alienated and ceased to belong independently to any formally recognized community, this does not mean that he or she did not experience or share informal social relations. A large number of works have demonstrated that slaves in both ancient and modern times had strong social ties among themselves. The important point, however, is that these relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding. Thus, American slaves, like their ancient Greco-Roman counterparts, had regular sexual unions, but such unions were never recognized as marriages: both groups were attached to their local communities, but such attachments had no binding force; both sets of parents were deeply attached to their children, but the parental bond had no social support.” Ibid, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Wilderson, 10-11.

and blackness on the other. The worker is a human who is entangled in a web of domination and exploitation, but the slave – which after the trans-Atlantic slave trade becomes ontologically inseparable from blackness – is not even human. The slave is the anti-human: the thing against which, at least in regard to the context of the United States, the human defines itself.

This process of the creation of the modern “human” is easy enough to understand by returning to Kant. He posits, as the a priori condition of a just state, the rational and autonomous member of the commonwealth: the human being. The only legitimate state, then, is one founded upon what we could call enlightenment humanism, of which Kant is the thinker par excellence. Kant is interested in the liberation of human reason for the purpose of the political, where the laws of practical reason amount to the voice of God. This liberation requires what we could call the liberal freedoms of individuals (as opposed, originally, to the conservative restrictions of the Church and the Monarch). This freedom is what allows for the slow, progressive cultivation of rationality that Kant believes will ultimately amount to the salvation of humanity. Thus, we can say that, with Kant, sovereignty is de-centralized, and interiorized to the human/subject/citizen of the liberal state.

That sovereignty is not decimated but rather disseminated is what is important for our purposes here. The structure of sovereignty, in other words, remains. Carl Schmitt’s now famous definition – “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception”<sup>33</sup> – suggests that sovereignty inaugurates and sustains itself through an exception, or more precisely here, an exclusion. And insofar as this dissemination has made sovereignty an ontological, rather than merely political, category it must now condition itself on an exclusion, not from the polis, but from humanity.<sup>34</sup> This excluded other against which humanity defines itself is, for Wilderson, blackness.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Kant played an essential role in the institutionalization of racial essentialism, according to Oludamini Ogunnaike. Kant’s racial essentialism can be demonstrated in statements like the following: “Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples.” As quoted in Oludamini Ogunnaike, “From Heathen to Sub-Human – A Genealogy of the Influence of the Decline of Religion on the Rise of Modern Racism,” Part 1-3, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory – Religious Theory*, September 22 – October 6, 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <http://jcrt.org/religioustheory/2016/09/19/from-heathen-to-sub-human-a-genealogy-of-the-influence-of-the-decline-of-religion-on-the-rise-of-modern-racism-part-1-oludamini-ogunnaike/>.

<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that Denise Da Silva problematizes this reliance on the logic of exclusion for understanding race. However, while the kind

Following the work of David Eltis<sup>36</sup> on population growths in Europe as compared to Africa in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth century, Wilderson suggests that it would have been more feasible and more profitable for Europeans to enslave other Europeans – likely poor serfs and convicts – than the expensive and ultimately less productive enslavement of massive amounts of Africans to be transferred to the new world. But, as Wilderson points out,

[W]hat Whites would have gained in economic value, they would have lost in symbolic value; and it is the latter which structures the libidinal economy of civil society. White chattel slavery would have meant that the aura of the social contract had been completely stripped from the body of the convict, vagrant, beggar, indentured servant, or child. This is a subtle point but one vital to our understanding of the relationship between the world of Blacks and the world of humans.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, it is impossible to separate the development of African chattel slavery from the development of the “human.” What is at stake are the very conditions under which the liberal democratic state can emerge. In order to maintain the formal equality necessitated, according to Kant, by the emergence of liberal democracy it was necessary to postulate the human which – while often the subject of contingent violence and death – was never exposed to gratuitous violence protected by the law. This sovereign, and simultaneously protected, citizen required an exception – which is to say an other – by which it could inaugurate itself as such. It is clear now that this condition is met by blackness.<sup>38</sup>

---

of in-depth analyses that this problem deserves falls outside the scope of this paper, it will be sufficient to say, here, that I do not see Wilderson’s argument as being mutually exclusive with Da Silva’s crucial insights. Insofar as Da Silva criticizes the logic of exclusion for implicitly reifying universality rather than considering blackness as the condition for its production, I read her work as being compatible with Wilderson’s insistence that the exclusion of blackness is the ontological (rather than merely political) condition for the production of (white, universal) humanity. See Denise Ferreira Da Silva, “Towards a Critique of the Socio-logos of Justice: The Analytics of Raciality and the Production of Universality,” *Social Identities* 7, no. 3 (2001): 421 – 454.

<sup>36</sup> David Eltis, “Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation,” *American Historical Review* 98.5 (1993), 1399–1423.

<sup>37</sup> Wilderson, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Oludamini Ogunnaike shows that modern racism is, in a certain sense, a unique and unprecedented historical development that can, at least in part, be attributed to the rise of modern secularism, which is itself a by-product of the rise of the sovereign human citizen to whom Kant most influentially lends his voice. See Ogunnaike, “From Heathen to Sub-Human.”

All of this is just to point out the sinister unconscious of #AllLivesMatter. What is unconscious in this instance is the new present – the one inaugurated by #BlackLivesMatter. This new present is obscured by #AllLivesMatter by way of a discursive sleight of hand: posit a formal equality of all lives in order to obscure and erase the actual inequalities of structural racism in the United States. Or, in other words, rather than subordinating the real, divided body to the trace of the event (the move of militant fidelity illustrated by #BlackLivesMatter) it subordinates the divided body to the non-divided, and therefore not real, body: the abstract notion of the “human.” However, what this imagined body is predicated on, and what it can never acknowledge, is the sovereign “human” posited over and against blackness. In other words, the real universal truth of #BlackLivesMatter is subordinated to the false universal concept of the “human.”

Badiou recognizes the problem with the “human” in the first chapter of *Ethics*.<sup>39</sup> He suggests, as I have, that this conception of the “human” is derived from Kant, or at least “an image of Kant,” which is to say an overly simplistic reading of Kant. Nonetheless, insofar as he rejects this conception Badiou becomes a resource for analyzing #AllLivesMatter in a way that reveals this sinister underbelly: the tacit exclusion of blackness from the humanity of #AllLivesMatter. Likewise, the formalizability of Badiou’s schema allows for it to be removed from the context of Marxist analyses – which, as mentioned above, is inadequate for conceptualizing the #BlackLivesMatter movement and its corresponding reactive dispositions – despite Badiou being a well-known Marxist. Whether or not the event and subjectivity can ultimately be reduced to such a formula is, strictly speaking, outside the scope of this paper; however, I argue that this formal schema is at least a useful way of conceptualizing and understanding the emergence of these subjective movements.

Lastly, there is one more consideration that requires elucidation. I have argued throughout this essay that #BlackLivesMatter names an event – which is not only a radical novelty in a world, as I have discussed, but one with universal consequences. The question, then, remains as to whether or not the consequences of #BlackLivesMatter are, in fact, universal. I have reserved this question for the end of this essay precisely because only now, I argue, can this question be answered – and I answer in the affirmative. Insofar as #AllLivesMatter is understood as relying on the “human” grammar – and its ontological exclusion of blackness – in order to obscure this new present, #BlackLivesMatter militantly affirms that particular expressions of life matter outside of the narrow confines of the “human.” Or, to be more specific, it affirms that the particular expression of life which the “human” defines itself against, matters. As Fanon

---

<sup>39</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 4-17.

reminds us: to decolonize the neoliberal human – which is to say the one in the position of the colonizer – requires a “new rhythm” and a “new language.”<sup>40</sup> This is why I say in the introduction that #BlackLivesMatter can be understood as more than a movement and more than identity politics – it can be understood as a universal truth procedure. And the truth it produces is found in its affirmation of particular lives, black lives, intentionally excluded from the false universal of the human, mattering.

In conclusion, #AllLivesMatter implicitly relies on a grammar of the “human,” which is always already posited over and against blackness. #BlueLivesMatter is also reliant on this construction but it narrows its focus to the perceived victimization of police by conflating calls for police accountability with persecution. However, neither one of these subjective dispositions is imaginable without the novel truth, within a particular world, militantly proclaimed, that black lives matter. #BlackLivesMatter is the subjective disposition which, going beyond a politics of State recognition, is faithful to this truth as it is simultaneously the trace of the event – the radical cultural shift that emerged alongside the particular state sanctioned murders of Treyvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others, and yet is universal in its consequences. The event is an event for everyone. The task now, according to Badiou, is to maintain fidelity to this proclamation.

---

<sup>40</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 3.