

White Suicide, Black Genocide: The Psychic Life of Labor and Freedom in Anti-Masking Movements

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Abstract: In protest of the COVID-19 lockdowns, crowds gathered in downtown Chicago to “Re-Open Illinois” during May 2020. One sign in particular, held by a white woman in an American flag mask, drew particular attention: “ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB,” invoking the German phrase hung above Nazi concentration camps to taunt the then governor of Illinois, J.B. Pritzker. Reactions to this anonymous woman were swift, but critics missed that “ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB” merely represented the front of the sign. When flipped, the sign read “Nice Haircut, Lori,” an antiblack affront to Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot. In this paper, we think this semiotic elision to contend with the inextricability of the motives of these protests and the psychic life of labor. Mobilizing this sign as a vehicle to consider the racialization of work as a grammar of suffering, we ask what the deployment of “work makes you free” reveals about the relationship between American whiteness, labor and antiblackness? To answer this question, we excavate the libidinal investments undergirding the protestor’s sign and its reliance on work as a category that renders the slave unthought. We contend that it is this cathexis that subtends the announcement by some conservative commentators that they would rather end their lives than live in lockdown. We conclude by engaging the anti-police brutality protests that occurred concurrent to the lockdowns, querying how the libidinal drives animating anti-masking may also scaffold the popularity of those movements.

Black Skin, White Masks; White Skin, Anti-Mask

On why Jacqueline, an anti-masker, opts not to wear a mask: “I get overheated really easy,”
- Emily Stewart, “Anti-maskers explain themselves”

At the time of writing, COVID-19 has killed more than 1 million people in the United States, with an ongoing increase in cumulative mortality alongside compounding debilitization from its long-term effects (Center for Disease Control). Politicizing breath, state representatives haphazardly implemented a series of measures including the temporary closure of workplaces and mask-wearing requirements before seemingly abandoning the endeavor to slow the disease entirely.^[1] The introduction of these measures and their attendant discourses articulated the tension between divergent notions of freedom—often elaborated through the politics of masking (Theophanidis; Zine). That is, as states struggled to deploy even minimally effective policies to ensure freedom from disease, protests abounded decrying an infringement of American liberty, such as one anti-masker’s statement that: “It’s a violation of my freedom, I think, and then also I just don’t think they work” (Stewart). Far from representing a fringe position, these anti-mask sensibilities consolidated through former president Donald Trump’s retweet of a *Federalist* article shared by Lee Smith with the commentary: “masks aren’t about public

health but social control. Image of Biden in black mask endorses culture of silence, slavery, and social death [sic]" (Relman). While the *Federalist* article staged the enforcement of 'mandatory' mask orders as a medically unsupported violation of freedom and liberty, Smith's (and Trump's) reframing of the issue as tantamount to enslavement reveals a deeper libidinal investment within the imago of the (Black) mask. In other words, these proclamations beg the questions: what semiotic transfers and displacements give form to such a reading of basic public health mechanisms? What fixations produce the avowed paranoia of Biden's 'black mask'? And, more significantly, what is at work in the analogue subtending anti-masker discourses so explicitly revealed in Trump's (re)tweet that renders masking analogous to slavery?

Precedented Times

Nearly contemporaneous with the start of the pandemic, a different aspirational fissure emerged. On May 25th, 2020, Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. During the prolonged, eight-minute execution, Chauvin's fellow officers J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane facilitated Floyd's restraint while Tou Thao prevented witnesses from intervening. Given a narrow field of options, bystanders responded by recording the execution and sharing it to social media. The video 'went viral,' with commentators and viewers quick to exceptionalize Floyd's death, grounding a refractory economy of spectacle (Martinot and Sexton) and pedagogical opportunity regarding both liberal inclusion and, however restrained, a *conversation* on the *possibility* of defunding the police. In contradistinction to this exceptionalization, many political critics and activists pointed to how Floyd's articulation of "I can't breathe" resonated across the decade as emblematic of rather than anomalous to the condition of Black life today (Domingues da Silva; Walcott). Indeed, its re-iterability across time and space both within and beyond the United States marks an aspirational precarity that precedes and exceeds the aspirational precarity induced by the novel coronavirus.

This precedential excess of breathlessness forestalls a claim to a homogeneously felt anxiety of breath within the coronavirus' affective atmosphere. Within this context, the racial-demographic structure of a phenomenon such as anti-masking is symptomatic not simply of an alliance between right-wing politics and whiteness, but indexes differences in material relationships to aspiration and asphyxiation. This paper begins to elaborate the unevenness of this atmosphere by examining a response that occurred on May 1st, 2020 when crowds gathered in downtown Chicago to "Re-Open Illinois." As hundreds marched across the city, protesters held signs exclaiming "Give me Liberty or Give Me COVID-19" (Hutchinson). But no sign attracted more attention than: "ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB," held proudly by a white woman in an American flag mask. Translating to "Work makes you free, JB," the sign invokes the German phrase hung above numerous Nazi concentration camps to taunt the then Democratic Jewish governor of Illinois, J.B. Pritzker. Within this semiotics, fascist violence is the preferred analogy to anchor a claim to subjugation.

Reactions to this anonymous woman were swift: the Auschwitz Memorial Museum declared the term "one of the icons of human hatred" and David Harris, CEO of the American Jewish Committee, tweeted that the use of the phrase was "Shocking. Shameful. Sickening" (Hutchinson). But in such disbelief that anti-Semitism was so brazenly wielded, critics missed that "ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB" merely represented the front of the sign. Unthought during this outcry was the sign's back. When flipped, the sign read "Nice Haircut, Lori," an antiblack affront to Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot (Kosuth).



Figure 1. White woman holds 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB' sign.



Dennis Kosuth
@Dennis_Kosuth

Thank you @agonyflips for combing raw footage and finding this YouTube video [youtube.com/watch?v=EzuObi...](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzuObi...) where this same person proudly displays their hate sign to others - and no one intervenes! When will #reopenillinois publicly condemn #IllinoisNazis? Their silence is deafening.



2:18 PM · May 4, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

The sign therefore discloses a quotidian antiblackness that subtends the relationship between white American ideals of liberty and freedom (Hartman). We are interested neither in sympathizing with Lightfoot, who as all Chicago mayors before her entrenches carceral violence, nor in comparing “Nice Haircut, Lori,” to “ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB,” but rather instead asking: why is there a semiotic elision in this discourse? In particular, we ask what the deployment of “work makes you free” reveals about the relationship between American whiteness, labor and antiblackness? Could this sign be emblematic of an American anxiety about the impossibility of white subjectivity without exploitation? In short, does “ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB” illuminate labor’s role within the white American psyche? Could what work makes the subject free from be Blackness?

To answer these questions, we historicize the phrase “work makes you free” to explore how it might “broker [] black lives in the national imaginary as an acceptable price to pay for white affective security and national norms of political civility” (Schuller 2). We then trace the ontological and historical inter-embeddedness of enslavement and freedom, illuminating how the logic subtending ‘arbeit macht frei’ grounds the impossibility of a metaphysical claim to Black freedom. Thus, we posit that undergirding the materialization of the protestor’s sign is a libidinal investment in work as a category that renders “the slave... the foundation of the national order” while simultaneously abjecting the slave to “the position of the unthought” (Hartman and Wilderson, 184-185).^[2] We conclude by engaging the anti-police brutality protests that occurred concurrent to the lockdowns, querying how the libidinal drives animating anti-masking may also scaffold the popularity of those movements. Thus, we identify how liberal political gestures converge with and reconfigure antiblack drives through the extension of civil society’s violence. In

Figure 2. Tweet by Dennis Kosuth that features the same white woman who has now flipped the sign so that one can see the back reads, "Nice Haircut, Lori!"

sum, by contextualizing the sign 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB/Nice Haircut, Lori' within this genealogy, we engage it as an unexceptional albeit revealing

example of a ritual that "sustain[s] [the] circuitous contentless logic" of white supremacy, cohering white being through ongoing and mundane forms of parasitism (Martinot and Sexton 175; King and Wilderson 57).

Rhetorical Infrastructures of Work and Freedom

Through this section, we trace the genealogy of 'arbeit macht frei' through scientific racism and national socialism in order to question the unthought space of freedom *from what*. We ask: what are the conditions of unfreedom that are thought outside or precede the articulation of this term, what we refer to as a logic of work → freedom. Who inhabits the abject metaphysical space that grounds a claim to a freedom achieved through such work, and for whom is work always and already the terminus of an anterior, unspoken metaphysics?

While the idiom 'work makes you free' evokes the 11th century German phrase 'city air makes you free,' the shift from 'air' to 'work' first appears in Lorenz Diefenbach's 1873 eponymous novel (Peters 332). The idiom reappears in French entomologist and ardent socialist eugenicist Auguste Forel's *Les Fourmis de la Suisse (The Ants of Switzerland)* (1920) where he employed ants to naturalize and defend Marxism. Arguing that ants live in "perfectly organized communist societies" where each ant performs their duties by instinct (Forel XIV), Forel averred that "perfect communism" was structured by a natural slavery (Forel XIV-XVII). Through this idealization, Forel arrives at a contradiction: if ant society is a perfect communism, how can some ants be slaves? In order to resolve this contradiction, Forel employs 'work makes you free' to emphasize that the slave-ants actually find freedom through their slavery. Here, the phrase's meaning compounds: 1) work makes non-slave-ants free because communism engenders freedom for all those who work, and 2) work makes the slave-ants free because the slave-ants find freedom within their work because they are, repeating the logics of white supremacy, in their proper, instinctive place. Forel avers that "these slaves are also free, even more free, because they are less dependent than their 'masters' for...work makes them free!" (Forel XIV).

Thus within the grammar of work → freedom, there is embedded within work an unthought constituent structure whereby work is not only composed of the proprietary subject's own capacity to labor, but rather also the composite extension of that capacity generated by the objects of his domain. In other words, embedded in the grammar of work → freedom, the enslaved are necessarily "the ground that...by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body" (Hartman 62). The slave undercuts the logic of work → freedom as the object upon whom freedom is made possible but for whom freedom is never made available. For the slave-ant's labor will free no ant that is not already free as it already labors under the conditions of a 'perfect' freedom. As an extension of the master, "work makes you free" might be better understood as (Slave) Labour Makes the Master Free(r).

If such rhetoric resonates with that which rationalized racial slavery, it is because they are, in fact, identical. Such arguments were frequently used by plantation owners to "guarantee the harmony of slave relations" (Hartman 89). As Sara-Maria Sorentino points out, slavery was "an emergent abstraction of anti-blackness," and thus the imagination of slavery cannot be disambiguated from it (632). If wherever Forel scribbles esclave, he may as well

have written, nègre, then the slave-ant's 'freedom' in slavery merely reifies the fungibility accorded to Blackness, for whom the category of labor is operative precisely because their body and labor are an extension of the master (Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx").^[3] Therefore, work → freedom loses its coherence when applied to the position of Blackness. Or rather the formulation $x \rightarrow \text{freedom}$ is untenable within the (antiblack) grammar at hand. Metaphysically, work → freedom fails in any encounter with Blackness because Blackness is the grounds upon which the rhetoric proceeds, providing the metaphysical stability of freedom explicitly because liberal subjectivity is subtended through this delimiting grammar (Hartman 133).

Haunted by this metaphysics of racial slavery, Forel's slave-ant exemplifies how both work and freedom are given form by the Black body. While labor is a "historical component of blackness," it is not a "constituent element" (Wang; Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx" 238). Simply put, "work is a white category" (Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx" 238). Thus, within this historical context, Forel invokes the phrase to render imperceptible the slave's grammar of suffering. As if he were writing with the explicit intention of proving Frank Wilderson (2003) correct, Forel maintains that perfection is achieved through slavery. The slave-ants sustain this utopia as the capacious metaphysical space from which he attributes to communism its conceptual coherence.

Nationalist Violences, Incivil Society

Wolfgang Brückner traces Arbeit Macht Frei through a series of similar phrases that were employed by the German government to emphasize one's duty to "national work"—the duty to develop German education and culture to consolidate the nation (Brückner 45; Judson; Stier 72 - 73). In particular, Brückner believes that the phrase was reinvented to emphasize the development of spirit rather than or as labor. Following the Deutsche Schulverein of Vienna's 1922 decision to print the motto on their membership cards, "work makes you free," became associated with German hegemony (Kearns 43; Grill 163 -165; Judson 52; Brückner 31; 44; 65). In the endeavor to reduce unemployment, labor became mythologized as a German ideal.^[4]

The population of this 'work' changed from the 1920s educational reform to the first imprisonment of political prisoners in 1933 where "Arbeit Macht Frei" hung above the predecessors of the concentration camps (Marcuse 26). Held indefinitely without trial, early camps were (largely) improvisational. Without prior precedent, the camps were assumed "temporary and acceptable" by civil society (Megargee 5). At the behest of the newly appointed "Inspector of the Concentration Camps and the SS Guard Units" Theodor Eicke, "Arbeit Macht Frei" was inscribed upon the camp gates of Dachau. Harold Marcuse intimates that Eicke's deployment of the motto cemented his newfound 1933 regulations that prisoners were "obliged to work" (Marcuse 26). Though at first, Nazi party officials objected to "opponents" of the party receiving jobs during an economic depression, Eicke quickly convinced them of its value because the labor was not productive but punitive (Allen 42). The Third Reich emphasized that labor would prevent any possibility for "stupid thinking" amongst prisoners, ensuring the security and discipline of the prison (Allen 43). Though some camps would eventually provide "meaningful, economic labor," work was introduced where productivity was subsidiary to punitivity (Allen 43).

This explication of the explicitly punitive purpose of Holocaust labor underscores that wage exploitation is reserved for those in civil society. Arbeit Macht Frei taunts those in captivity polysemically. The sign muddies a) the promise of socialism on the outside—that work will make one free, b) the promise of nationalism—that work

will make the country free, and c) the conditions of servitude inside the camps eliding either promise, for what work would most often bring is death. What the idiom establishes is a logic of work → freedom, such that freedom = death. Underlying these obfuscations is the initial purchase that labor could have any currency at all, for Jews “were not classified as people who could work, and they were also not eligible to earn freedom through work” (Stier 75).

Instead, in this “provisional moment within existential Whiteness,” Nazi prisoners were moored through the rhetoric of slavery (Wilderson, *Red, White and Black* 36). However, it is the provisionality of this moment that is why the sign has “served an emblematic function within Holocaust memorial culture,” as a “symbolic (if not actual) entranceway into hell” (Stier 69). If as Oren Baruch Stier argues Arbeit Macht Frei underscores Nazi myth more than it does prisoner experience—for the majority of those in any camp never saw the sign—then the phrase perfects the implicit brutality of Forel’s slave-ant. Arbeit Macht Frei retains its affect because it signifies the violence that constitutes civil society.

The Antecedent Position of Arbeit Macht Frei

Within this inheritance, the sign “ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB” stages myriad forms of ritualizing work. First, wielding a sign with a Nazi slogan communicates an anti-Semitic threat to Governor Pritzker by warning ‘the camp’ as rejoinder to his lack of work in relation to the coronavirus. The freedom offered is death. But second, the sign can also be interpreted as a hand reaching out to guide Pritzker to freedom, as if to say “work will not only set us, but will also set you free.” By letting the people of Illinois work, the governor is invited to submit to a centrifugal force that “proffer[s] an innocuous inclusion into life” (Puar 31). Pritzker is reminded not only of his duty to serve his constituents through his own work, but also through capacitating his constituents’ employment. Deprived of capitalist potential, the Holocaust becomes a threat, a promise, and a sinister declaration that closing work is akin to Nazi fascism. However, only focusing on the risibility of the claim dissimulates an anxiety for which the sign is merely symptomatic. Such ratcheting up of Governor Pritzker’s bureaucratic measures to the level of genocide demands a closer reading. Torquing these prior readings, we ask: does the capacity to wield the Holocaust as both threat and analogy demonstrate the mythologization of labor as the source of national spirit and the yoking of that labor to the Aryan race because exploitation is a non-Black grammar of suffering? If so, then what does one become should one lose the organizing logic of work(er)?

Read this way, the sign materializes as a declaration of anxiety—an anxiety of not working and, in not working, being reduced to that which is not defined by the proprietary subject of work. The “ARBEIT MACHT FREI” sign articulates a libidinal defense of whiteness because it is a defense against the creep toward formlessness. Because antiblackness is “foundational to the fantasy space of desires which underwrite the industrialist’s hegemony,” the sign announces a white cathexis that beseeches Governor Pritzker to work so that the citizen may sustain the nation through their work (Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx” 233). “Work makes you free, JB” therefore acts as a multivalent cipher: 1) an anti-Semitic declaration; 2) a white desire for exploitation; and 3) an antiblackness across ontology, paradigm and history.

The protestor's sign exhibits a co-productive complementarity of exploitation and expropriation, where "the 'front story' of free workers who are contracted by capitalists to sell their labor-power...is enabled by, and depends on, expropriation that takes place outside this contractual arrangement" (Wang 123). Whereas the front story of the sign reeks of the desire to engage in a capitalist phantasy, the back story marks an unthought and exigent antiblackness animating that desire. "Nice Haircut, Lori" is an accusation of hypocrisy targeting Black women's sociality because Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot received a haircut despite the state's 'Stay-At-Home' order. In response to critics who derided Lightfoot for getting her hair cut despite reprimanding the public weeks earlier for engaging in frivolous risks like "getting your roots done," she argued that "I'm the public face of this city. I'm on national media and I'm out in the public eye" (Spielman). Of course, Lightfoot's response evokes both a particular mode of bourgeois hypocrisy and a hyper-present scrutiny that she experiences as a Black lesbian mayor. But, more significant is that the sign mobilizes Lightfoot's hair as a medium to stage an antagonism over Black sociality more broadly. Within this antagonism, "Nice Haircut, Lori" denigrates Black social life through the reiteration of a particular vector of misogynoir, the fixation on Black women's hair, to give force to its ostensible critique of hypocrisy. Hidden by the horror of anti-Semitism is a demand, mediated through misogynoir, for the end of Black (social) life, or rather, a reminder that this social life is always already lived under conditions of social death (Sexton). In the claim to ensure white sociality (the front) is the impossibility of Black sociality (the back).

Aspiration and Asphyxiation

This structural interdiction on Black sociality is, as many scholars have demonstrated, often focalized on aspirational politics. Demonstrating the significance of aspiration for thinking Blackness, Christina Sharpe considers "the necessity of breath, to breathing space, to the breathtaking spaces in the wake in which we live" (Sharpe 109). These breathtaking spaces evoke a dual valence, referring both to a terrible beauty and a space where breath is stolen - how chattel slavery "exhausted the lungs and bodies of the enslaved" exactly because "breathing, in fact, corresponds to the first autonomous gesture of a human being" (Sharpe 112; Irigaray 73). The legacy of this exhaustion continues in multiple forms such as through the doubled health risk (in comparison to white Americans) of air pollution despite a so-called "nationwide decline" of contaminants (Ard and Bullock 277). In fact, air pollution is so yoked to Blackness that "every 1 percent increase in low-income African Americans living in an area," increases the likelihood "significantly" that the area would become polluted (Ohio State University). While the attendant health risks of this environmental racism are already distressing, they are intensified under the conditions of COVID-19 (Kampa and Castanas; Meo et al.; Sanyaolu)

This is to say that breath is not uniformly distributed and to imagine it as such obfuscates the structuring processes of antiblack suffocation that circumscribe Black life. Due to this paradigm, in assembling to reopen the economy, the anti-masking public gathered to further catalyze Black death. Given that this parasitic genocide is the "condition of possibility" (Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx" 238) for the economy to function, this violence is only intensified during a pandemic where exposure to airborne pathogens and environmentally-induced predispositions to respiratory illness compound the structure of sacrifice. Even the notion of re-opening the economy presumes its closure, concealing that for many no such closure exists. Black people are disproportionately employed in high-risk front-line work deemed "essential," but paid essentially nothing (Gould and Wilson; Gould and Shierhold). Similarly, the political economy of the prison continued unabated during the so-called period of closure. Whether forced to fight Californian wildfires or stuck in cages with people who were

COVID positive, the disproportionately Black prison population faced uniquely intensive pneumatic risks. Asphyxiation reproduces itself through both too much and too little air. And so, “ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB” structurally obscures both the ‘essential’ work that is already being demanded despite the economy’s so-called closure and, perhaps more profoundly, the ongoing work of keeping breath in the Black body (Sharpe) as the demand to return to work disavows the possibility that respiration could require attention at all. As many (white) people escaped the plague airs and worked from their cottages, antiblack antagonism continued on schedule, proliferating a demand for “muted deaths” (Douglass).

Thus, there are multiple vectors at play in the refusal to counteract the novel coronavirus, and while anti-maskers are often framed as ignorant and foolish, the celebrity and political endorsements of COVID-19’s equalizing properties evince something far greater than ignorance. Rather, there is a structural prohibition, an active investment into a “genocidal process of disavowal in... [white] epistemic systems,” that appears here as a *Folie à Blanc* wherein whiteness produces a mass paranoia exactly because it is sutured by work (Wilderson and King 58). Formations of work and capital circumscribe and delimit the white imagination in its ability to envision both the scope of the virus, and the parasitic ‘risks’ that imagination is willing to take. Returning to the articulations of anti-maskers as symptomatic of the structural antagonism circumscribed by global antiblackness, we might re-read the claims made by Amy in the prologue when she says: “It’s a violation of my freedom, I think, and then also I just don’t think they work” (Stewart). In discussing the discursive function of freedom, Wilderson writes:

political discourse recognizes freedom as a structuring ontologic and then it works to disavow this recognition by imagining freedom not through political ontology - where it rightfully began - but through political experience (and practice) whereupon it immediately loses its ontological foundations... in allowing the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status, one would have to lose one’s Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die. (*Red, White & Black*, 22-23)

Amy’s articulation of her refusal to wear a mask renders Wilderson’s diagnostic of the shift from freedom-qua-ontology to freedom-qua-experience apparent. Ironically then, it is a fear of (social) death and not a disregard of it that drives Amy’s refusal to wear a mask through her desperate, cathartic grip on this modicum of imagined freedom. In her admission that “I just don’t think they work,” Amy implicitly concedes that there *is*, in fact, a risk of transmission and contraction of the virus. However, in her refusal to wear a mask, she reveals that she would rather die a Human than lose her “cultural coherence” (Wilderson and King 57) and experience the death of those who are already (socially) dead. Amy fears the dissolution of her sovereignty far more than the dissolution of her body proper, though both fears are scaffolded by an anxiety of affectability (Bradley).

Similarly, many older conservative commentators claimed they would be willing to die to continue working in service of their country (read: empire) and their children (read: the white race) because an economic shutdown was a supposedly greater (existential) threat (Sheperd). Given that to die for the economy renders white death akin to the state of unproductivity, why (or rather how) would one die to work? How does white suicide become the medium of ostensibly anti-fascist (though never ANTIFA) protest? For Amy and these commentators, their deaths seem to stave off the end of their Worlds, an anxiety anticipated by Alexis Pauline Gumbs when she writes, “they hated the black women who were themselves, a suicidal form of genocide. so that was it. they could only make the planet unbreathable” (Gumbs 7). In this passage, Gumbs reveals a circuitry within the logics of antiblackness and inter-scalar violence. Like climate change, COVID-19 is another method to asphyxiate the

planet, ensuring Black death because “violence against the slave is integral to the production of that psychic space called social life” (Wilderson, “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation” 19). And so, this phenomenon is neither white ignorance nor white fragility. It is the explicit production and maintenance of antiblackness.

However, the remodelling of whiteness-as-suicide clarifies the psychic structure of labor, race and affectability, as unproductivity is rendered synonymous with social death, which, in turn, is figured worse than material death. Amy and others are willing to risk their lives as martyrs because if breathing is in fact the first signifier of being (Irigaray), then to mask would be to establish that one could be an affectable subject, to admit a shared species, a shared humanity. To mask would be to admit one’s own openness, a condition paradigmatically projected upon the slave. The mask marks a violation of the self-determined sovereign subject, as Rizvana Bradley notes, for it elucidates the “body’s precarious microbiological entanglement” (Bradley 24). Thus, the mask hosts myriad metaphors, analogies and displacements of fascism, the Holocaust, “Slavery, and social death,” because the demand to mask is received “as an outrageous impingement upon one’s proprietary claim to freedom and self-determination” (Trump; Bradley 23). Yet, this rhetoric only functions if one brandishes a freedom so gratuitous that any constraint becomes akin to captivity, to an attack on the self-determining subject. To assuage this crisis of capacity, as Bradley avers through Denise Ferreira da Silva, these anti-maskers deploy the arsenal of raciality as the “principal means, not of resolving, but rather of displacing the contradiction” of corporeality by deploying both Blackness and Jewishness as modes of difference, separation and affectability (Bradley 23).

Work Will Set You Free deploys Jewishness as an historically contingent affectable whiteness to displace the affectability demanded of mask-wearers. Envisioning themselves as Jews, anti-maskers not only protect the sovereignty of whiteness through this displacement. These protesters also mobilize the historic deployment of the Holocaust as the “affective destination that made legible the ensemble of questions animating the political common sense of oppression” to introduce an imagination of anti-maskers as an oppressed population themselves (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 35). Both this ease of identification and the broader exploitation of the Holocaust as the medium to confront oppression writ-large are moored by the historical contingency of these deaths, yielding a victimhood and innocence that renders the lack of Jewish productivity justifiable. The Holocaust becomes a stage upon which the white can be imagined in relation to unproductivity and the absence of work. By way of juxtaposition, “ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB” questions whether COVID-19 is pernicious enough to demand the sacrifice of unemployment.

Thus, the sign’s mobilization of *Work Makes You Free* functions similarly to the sign above the camps. On the one hand, unseen by the captives, it informs the Nazi guard of their duty to the nation, wherein their work will set the nation free. Yet contemporarily, this work may include their own suicide. Whiteness is ratcheted up to the level of deity, such that white suicide becomes an act of martyrdom, an “act whereby one becomes other than oneself,” becomes the sacrifice for a brutal totality of (white) freedom (Mbembe 50). In so doing, this martyr “escapes from the facticity of life” to “destroy such impure corporeal life,” to kill the affectable body, and so, to kill Blackness (Mbembe 50). COVID-19 is both an “ironic []” welcomed guest and a horrifying threat, as the horizon of death is always-already overdetermined as Black. Masking thereby indexes a tension over the constitution of the subject that is ultimately dissimulated through this white martyrdom (Bradley 24).

On the other hand, working to death provides no freedom for those in bondage, no actual peace, but instead indexes the lie that one could become free at all. In other words, overdetermined by death, affectability and incapacity already, Black death is not spectacular because it is the norm. Akin to Forel's ant, it brings no freedom besides that freedom already assured to the Master. While seemingly incongruent at first, "Nice Haircut, Lori" and its inability to be thought of is revealing of the requirement for both the presence of raciality, and in particular the dissimulation of antiblackness. The sign dramatizes how the sovereign subject's identification as laborer produces an anxious defense that may only be abated by both figural white suicide and material Black death. Thus, these white claims to martyrdom serve as rhetorical deflections from the structural organization of gratuitous violence. Though these protesters may claim they are subjected to fascism, the only genocide is that of their own demand. The call is coming from inside the house.

Moving through an analysis of ritualizing white protests demonstrates how whiteness consolidates itself during a moment of ostensibly shared global risk. The materialization of the "ARBEIT MACHT FREI, JB" sign, symptomatic of a broader structure of antagonism, discloses how the economy (and its maintenance) is invested in as a site where white freedom materializes through and because of Black (social) death. Thus, the demands to re-open the economy and the refusals to mask are symbolic of the ways in which the libidinal economy, the subject, and its leeching of Black life subtend the desire to work within the white imaginary. The freedom at stake within the anti-maskers is very explicitly a freedom from Black (social) death, a freedom to be exploited, a freedom to be a state subject— a freedom that organizes itself around the subjection of Black being, which may be the only kind of freedom at all.

Coda: The Chokehold Animating Assembly

Through this genealogy, we have illuminated what might be, at surface, a fairly simple proposition: that there is a structural inter-relation between anti-masking and white supremacy. But the contours of the libidinal economy extend beyond anti-maskers, pressing us to consider how the staged relation between social death and freedom animates politics beyond the bounds of the 'right.' If the desired distance from social death, and the phantasmatic imaging of medical-mask-qua-*white*-racial-slavery, occasions the legibility of the political in this obviously reactionary instance, does such an occasioning haunt other more ostensibly radical formations?

In his monograph *Breathing*, noted autonomist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi begins with a chapter entitled "I Can't Breathe," writing in the first sentence: "I suffer from asthma, so perhaps I was affected by a sense of asthmatic solidarity when I saw the video of Eric Garner's assassination" (15). In scaffolding his own imagined suffering through Garner's death, performed through his introduction of so-called "asthmatic solidarity," Bifo's coalitional desires disclose a parasitic relation where Eric Garner's murder is positioned as the fungible material for Bifo's own subjectivity. Stealing Garner's dying words, Berardi goes on to state that "I can't breathe" might "express the general sentiment of our times;" and in only one more page, he abandons Garner completely, using respiration to "discuss our contemporary chaos and search for an escape from capitalism" (Berardi 15 -16). Thus, Garner's death becomes the medium to establish a supposedly universal capitalist exploitation, a parasitic vitalization of white political strategy enabling an affective plane upon which to form the next International. If, as Hartman demonstrates: "the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm[s] the materiality of black sentience only by feeling for himself" (Hartman 90), then Bifo's turn to "asthmatic solidarity" and the obliteration of Garner for the

elaboration of a “general sentiment of our times” repeats the political drive inherent to ‘arbeit macht frei’ and the anti-masking protests. By rendering breathlessness emblematic of exploitation, Berardi dissimulates an *a priori* antiblackness structuring both this claim to a universal exploitation and the claim to freedom therein, redounding upon the sign’s violent rhetoric. Far from being a fringe antiblackness, Bifo’s repetition raises questions about the impetus animating white political action more broadly, even and most especially in its most radical formations. If Bifo demonstrates a continuity of political subjectivity between the anti-maskers and radical autonomist Marxists, then how might the continuum of political action between both the left and the right intensify a prior and requisite antiblackness?

While speculative, the conjunction between early lockdown and the massive protests repeating the mantra “I can’t breathe,” is certainly worthy of pause. Just as Bifo refracts Garner’s death to apprehend his own suffering, so too might the turn to protest in the wake of Floyd’s murder index a similar empathic obliteration. Though many lamented the shackles of lockdown while consciously acknowledging the necessity of such constraint, the psychic coordinates of the figurative laborer scaffold an unconscious network of associations constellating lockdown, as demonstrated by the Trump (re)tweet, akin to slavery. In this imagined captivity, it is unsurprising that many might feel compelled to join a ‘righteous cause’ through which they could contest their own sense of enclosure.

While perhaps cynical to note, many protestors narrated their participation as part of a ‘broader’ struggle opposed to a universally felt dissatisfaction with the state due to COVID-19 measures. In one study, more than 20% of respondents justified their attendance through their general “discontent with the current federal government” (Arora). Almost all of these people reported not only that public health procedures had a detrimental effect on their finances but also nearly 80% reported that these actions were the first Black Lives Matter protests they had ever attended (Arora). Like Bifo’s maneuvers from Eric Garner’s execution to his own asthma to breathlessness as universal phenomena, these protesters seem to orchestrate a similar series of transfers. Highlighting this is not to discredit or disparage the wide range of organizing efforts by Black activists who sought to both grieve antiblack murders and fight for a more livable present, but to contend with how and under what conditions the solidarity on offer by non-Black people during this ‘global reckoning’ came to take shape.

This is to ask: why does “I can’t breathe” elicit such political attention with the murder of Floyd, and not Eric Garner, Christopher Lowe, Javier Ambler II, Derrick Scott, Byron Williams, John Neville, Elijah McClain, Manuel Ellis, or any number of Black people who uttered its idiom while brutally subjected to police violence? If the phantasmatic circulation and subsequent abjection of social death gives form to the political claim for liberty as such, then the trace of this maneuver resonates through any movement inasmuch as it orients itself toward freedom. This resonance might be one reason among many that Bradley would argue that the difference between the ‘racial reckoning’ of 2020 and anti-lockdown protesting is “infinitesimal” (22). Building on her work, we might say that the ‘support’ for protests decrying police brutality by way of a ‘general discontent’ is, in a perverse way, the unwitting political partner to anti-masking movements, both of which consolidate an antiblack *socius* using the idiom of slavery, whether explicitly or implicitly, to capacitate their demands. To be clear, this is not an argument against the urgent need to completely dismantle policing at both the empirical and ontological level, but

to question how such a politics is, in fact, distorted by the chokehold of popular assembly, how the discourse of freedom insidiously brokers liberal coalitions that may, upon reflection, work against the very goals we aver ourselves to be agitating toward.

And so, if “I can’t breathe” expresses, as Bifo so carelessly opines, a “general sentiment of our times,” it is not because it reflects a communal breathlessness, openness to economic exploitation, or inter-embeddness within an ecology of crisis, but rather because it discloses how that which is so often unsaid makes the imagined collective possible. It is only through the violent and enforced exclusion of Blackness from the political commons, the prefigurative ‘I can’t breathe,’ that plural forms of performative action struggle over the civic terrain and the meaning of freedom in its empirical instance. But if the libidinal contours of assembly trend toward this mode of enforced strangulation, what is the motive force to challenge social death and terror? As we unevenly breathe in the coronavirus’s wake, the pathogen for assembly awaits our answer.

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Notes

1. The rates of transmission vary due to setting, mask choice, and other variables, but it is generally agreed upon that masks help to stop the transmission of COVID-19, with some studies finding that a tight N-95 respirator would protect “the wearer from actual coronavirus particles,” by 79 - 90% (Parker-Pope and Sheikh).
 2. Wilderson extrapolates upon Jared Sexton’s theorization of the libidinal economy, stating “as ‘the economy or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement) and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious...’ It is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption” (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 7).
 3. By fungible here, we refer to the commodification and exchangeability constitutive of Blackness through the slave trade, where the slave, stripped of will, subjectivity and being, was violently positioned as their Master’s property. As Hartman remarks, the slave “existed only as an extension or embodiment of the owner’s rights of property” (82).
 4. This nationalism was built upon antiblack colonial logics that rationalized the German colonization of Africa, including the brutal 1907 Genocide of the Nama people, and the resources extracted from their attendant colonization (Judson; Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop 14; Samudzi). Alongside these processes of extraction came additional efforts to deport as many Afro-Germans as possible (Aitken and Rosenhaft). National coherence was stabilized through the joint colonial effort to evict Afro-Germans from Germany while simultaneously looting colonized African land. Even as wealthy Afro-Germans were ostensibly welcomed as selective conduits for capital, anti-Blackness delimited the possibility of national belonging.
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Cite this Essay

Falek, Joshua and Patrick Teed. “White Suicide, Black Genocide: The Psychic Life of Labor and Freedom in Anti-Masking Movements.” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 39, 2023, doi:10.20415/rhiz/039.e03
