The Intricacies of Sovereignty

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“What precedes the Black register?” is the confounding question asked by Fred Moten in his compelling foreword to The Black Register. By this inquisition, Moten locates the very source of Sithole’s disgruntlement: the search for a grammar, a human register that is faithful to the arduous work of unraveling black dehumanization. And yet, Sithole’s pen, which Moten lavishes with admiration, also bleeds unreservedly onto each page, where one is confronted with a line of inquiry about blackness and the register it requires in order to affirm its place in the world. Indeed, this is one of the many fundamental concerns this project seeks to establish, whereby a fundamental question arises: can blackness register? This very question prompts more serious ones worth subsequent consideration: how do we ascertain the significance of Sithole’s entry? How do we appraise its place in the domain of black radical thought?

One might regard this book as simply another text that chimes with revolutionary sentiment yet offers no meaningful “registers” or lenses that can help us understand our black conditions more succinctly. Thus, in a meaningful way, Moten’s inquiry is a necessary one, for it helps us probe and make sense of Sithole’s ambitious attempt here. Yet in addition to questioning what precedes it, Moten alerts us to the likelihood of blackness not being registered at all—being subdued into desolation and, in fact, emptied out; stripped of its capacity to affirm itself.

By Sithole’s own admission, this is indeed the precariousness that circumscribes this mode of critique and indeed black life at large. He insists that “the black register does not mean legibility. It can be erased; and it can be violated.”¹ By this, we are given a sense that the black register is as vulnerable as the very condition(s) of blackness it attempts to expound on. This is, in some sense, the delicate orientation of the black register: it is on the one hand a necessary language that affirms black life yet equally one that is marred by instability as it indexes black conditions that are inherently unsta-
ble. Thus, what might appear to be an impasse is perhaps the very quality that enables the black register to speak even more compellingly about blackness. My reflections on this momentous book are undertaken with this understanding.

Here I would prefer to provide some running thoughts that reinforce the importance of this text by looking at a less familiar place—a place that one might easily ignore yet that is, in a strong sense, highly illuminating: the cover of the book. This cover art is a work by the South African luminary, multimedia artist Dineo Seshee Bopape, titled “mabu/mubu/mmu” (2017).

Highly revered for her layered installations and experimental videos, Bopape’s work is penetrating yet never fails to intrigue. This particular work, shown at the Pinchuk Art Centre and later at the Venice Biennale, is but one of many in her oeuvre that demonstrates her particular concern for issues pertaining to, amongst others, land and landlessness. It is surely not a coincidence that this installation, with its peculiar crevice, made from flattened soil structures, feathers, brass uterus forms, clay pieces, and other paraphernalia, complements Sithole’s aestheticism and rigor.

Bopape’s use of compressed soil is twofold: she alludes to, on the one hand, the importance of soil (and indeed land) to the spiritual practices of her people in Limpopo in South Africa where at various times, mounds of soil are created to extract and transmit messages between the living and the dead. In such instances, the soil ceases being merely earth and assumes an intermediary function that connects and strengthens beings and lineages. Such an understanding, of course, which thematizes the land as a living entity, further determines it as an agent that affords a people their self-understanding. As soil is ever so pertinent to her people’s psychic well-being, it is no surprise then that it spills over into the thematics of Bopape’s work around land possession, dispossession, and repossession.

Andile Mngxitama reminds us that “there is no clear break with colonial and apartheid relations of oppression, exploitation, and indignity for the landless, less so with capitalist property relations and ownership of land.” This utterance somewhat resonates with Bopape’s work, which is in many ways an unambiguous referent to an age-old discourse that occasions South Africa’s modern history—with the Native Land Act of 1913 being one of its nodal points.

This legislative act, in its draconian logic, stripped black inhabitants of more than 87 percent of fertile land and reallocated it to a minority group. The haunting specter of this dispossession cannot be understated, for a century later it still organizes and determines how the black South African populace relates to the land. This second thrust of Bopape’s work, with its propensity to probe and reread salient aspects of history, unfolds as a kind of speech—indeed, as a register with a political bent, which allows for a (radical) refusal of the lull that accompanies postapartheid rainbowist sensitivities. Bopape’s address of this historical subject ultimately converges on an inquisition into how the repossession of land is by extension a reposs...
session of the self. In fact, one could say that, in their respective mediums, both she and Sithole are preoccupied with at once exploring and affirming self-sovereignty as it pertains to the black subject. Bopape, for one, is rather explicit about it in questioning, “how does one claim sovereignty over the self?”

Sithole distinctly evidences a similar concern for self-sovereignty in his insistent reading of Steve Biko as the “figure of the outlawed.” He asserts that “the self in the form of the black self is a predicament” and continues to say that “Biko as the self is such, by the very fact of his blackness and his relationality (that which does not have any capacity) to the antiblack world.” As we know, Biko, the charging advocate for a black political register, has a penchant for self-realization — the coming into one’s own through an exhaustive process of inward examination. In this, Sithole generates a conversation that distills the “outlawing” of Biko: one is reminded here that Biko is a figure who, without reserve, refuses the colonial imposition of being constructed as a problem. Consequently, he becomes a problem to this very discourse that seeks to thingify black peoples into permanent states of objecthood and nonexistence.

Sithole is mindful in this regard to remind us that it is in the nature of antiblackness to facilitate this thingification and indeed the construction of the black self as a problem. It is henceforth the reason why he harkens back to Black Consciousness philosophy, which in its engagement with blackness on an ontological level, endows the black self with a sense of self-ownership. This is profoundly important for understanding the predicament of being black in an antiblack world. Sithole is rather particular about this point when he states, “To be antiblack is to assume a white essentialist positionality, which locates blackness in the exterior of humanity.”

We know full well that “the quest for a true humanity” is an important concern for Biko, which is why he insists that “thinking along lines of Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself a being complete in himself.” By this very assertion, the possibility of self-sovereignty moves from being a mere abstraction to being a realizable act. Sithole is undeniably in song with Biko as he reinforces particular strands of his thought, but one must also register here that there is equally an unnoticed conversation he is having with Bopape, which centers on the notion of self-sovereignty, or, put differently, the attempt to nullify state sovereignty and the juridical order, which, in the lexicon of antiblackness, are relentless in assaulting black bodies. Of course this notion recurs in other parts of the book where Sithole shows the pertinence of this black register and how it speaks to and about present happenings. This is perhaps most evident in his discussion where he at once relates to and addresses the Marikana massacre as a “conceptual anxiety of bare life,” which he opens by enforcing that “the life of the black subject is always at stake for the very fact of its nearness and entanglement to wanton violence, humiliation, indignity, dehumanization, and death.”
In this discussion, Sithole attends quite engagingly to the structural positioning of the black subject who is located in the zone of nonbeing. Through the canonical ideas of Gorgio Agamben, he expounds on the Marikana massacre—the most recent illustration of gratuitous state-sanctioned violence against black peoples in South Africa. This discussion informs us that perhaps self-sovereignty has its limits and that it is the might of state power that ensures that self-sovereignty for the black subject is incapacitated—oftentimes resulting in death.

Sithole, it seems to me, is not merely interested in unraveling the politics surrounding labor militancy and the state’s aversion to it, nor is he solely concerned with the physical deaths of the thirty-four mineworkers who were killed with impunity. It appears that by deploying Agamben’s conception of “bare life,” he wants to cast a critical glance on the erasure of the black subject who is, in some senses, circumscribed by death. There is to consider, aside from the fact that the mineworkers physically died, a kind of social or civic death, which in its nature demands the stripping of the subject’s human rights.

The salient point here is that the Marikana massacre occurs in postapartheid South Africa where black peoples are understood to have the right to life—a point that may confound his application of bare life to his reading of the massacre. This tension is, however, given secondary importance, or none at all, as Sithole is distinctly concerned with applying the initial premise of the idea and using it to stress that

Marikana is actually the very act of questioning blackness. It is the non-existence of blackness where the whole conception of humanity is suspended and what is brought to the fore is blackness. That is to say, what exists is not the human, but the black. The visibility of blackness is paradoxically the invisibility of the human. The existence of blackness is scandalous in that non-existence precedes existence. To put the humanity of the black subject into question means blackness is the phenomenon without analogy.

The crux of Sithole’s analysis is illuminated better here where he offers that the totalitarian power that acts upon the black subject ensures the latter’s nonexistence. This is to say that what Marikana evidences is not only the vulnerability of the black subject to the state’s might and authority, but indeed the “perpetual erasure” that accompanies being a black subject in a racist environment. Ultimately, the intricate analysis he offers enlarges the space to think about ideas around sovereignty: the sovereignty of the (black) self on one hand and equally so, on the other hand, the precarious structural positioning of this self in a racist state.

When Moten inquires, “What precedes the black register?” one is compelled to think about the manifold ways in which Sithole conjures up a syntax that is informed by queries, observations, and assertions that enrich our “ways of thinking, knowing and doing”: the necessary acts that assist us in navigating the anti-
black world. This short rumination has sought to illuminate some of the hidden treasures in this book, which demands critical attention. It is hoped that this entry will open up more reflections on the theoretical reach of the black register as a grammar of blackness.

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Acknowledgments
A significant part of this research was conducted while I was affiliated with the South African Research Chair (SARCHI) in South African Art and Visual Culture at the University of Johannesburg. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not attribut-
able the SARCHI chair.

Notes
4. Sithole, Black Register, 97.
6. Sithole, Black Register, 97.
8. Sithole, Black Register, 222.
10. Sithole, Black Register, 225.

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